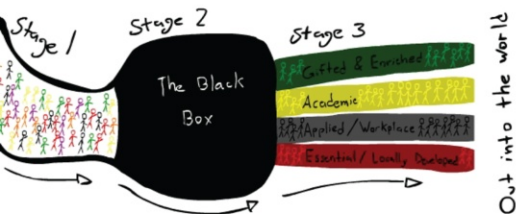


# How Black and Working Class Children Are Deprived of Basic Education in Canada

Bairu Sium



*SensePublishers*

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## PREFACE

This is a longitudinal study of a kind covering roughly twenty-four year time span. It started with an ethnographic study conducted in a split grade five and six classroom in Toronto during the 1985/86 academic year. Data were collected through participatory observation, as well as through individual and group interviews. A group of eight activist African-Canadian high school students, as well as 26 Euro- Canadian “drop-backs” were also interviewed in the nineties and the first decade of the 21st century. The time during which I conducted the study was a period of intensive education activism of parents and the community in Toronto. I was interested in determining whether or not, and this activism was reflected at the school level, and if it was reflected, how. I also wanted to examine whether or not the historically supportive auxiliary role that parents played during this period elevated to more substantive and meaningful active involvement in the education of their children.

This study shows that activities in the classroom were driven by pre-packaged curriculum materials and were implemented with very few modifications. Coupled with teacher-centred practice, this closed the door for any diversifying opportunities that could have found their way into the classroom, not only from the homes of the children and the school community, but also from critics of the use of prepackaged material and, most importantly, from the students themselves.

Furthermore, teacher-centred classroom discourse pushed students to develop a cynical attitude towards schooling. Having no say in what or how they were taught provided the children with few choices but to develop a coping mechanism of passive resistance. Their short-term survival strategies included appearing as though they were striding along, but not embracing their school experiences fully. By the same token, they were not challenged to think critically, to evaluate or to problem-solve. A link was also established between the students’ passive resistance at the elementary level with ‘fading out’ or ‘dropping out’ and successful resistance and succeed at the high school level.





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Thanks to professors Roger Simon, Jim Cummins and Phillip Coregan for guiding my research proposal as well as helping in getting access to the research site.

During the course of writing this book, my children Sewit and Aman were the first line of advice and suggestions. They themselves being graduate students and graduates of the school system under study, they had quite a bit to say and their comments were very helpful.

My very special appreciation is reserved for professors Kari Dehli (the supervisor), Tara Goldstein and John Portelli. They made a very positive team and afforded me their unlimited time, guidance and vital comments. They constantly put me to the test of clarifying statements made and seeking evidential backing as well. For that I am very thankful.



**PART I**  
**INTRODUCTION**

## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

At the time when the research for this study was initiated, in the 1985/86 academic year, Toronto was already a multicultural city. There was no doubt that the process of multiculturalization of Canadian society in general and the City of Toronto in particular was going to intensify. Europe was already exhausted as a source of immigrants recruited to fulfill the unmet labour requirements of Canada. Increasingly, Canada looked towards the Caribbean, Asia, Africa, and South America for new immigrants.

It has been reported by the UN Expert Group on Population that 2008 was the year when more people lived in urban than rural areas for the first time in history. Another UN report stated that “by 2050, two-thirds of the world’s population will live in cities ...” (UN-Habitat, World Urban Forum 3, 2006). The same reports showed that migrations have historically been primarily between urban centres, i.e. from urban centres in developing countries to urban centres in Europe and North America. Therefore, with further intensification of urbanization, one expects an increase in migration. It is evident that North America has been among the top recipients of net immigration. At the same time though the US is lagging behind Canada in numbers, Europe is receiving a steady flow of refugees from Africa, Asia, and South America.

I would speculate that increased multiculturalization of the world would mean relaxing laws regarding immigration, as a result of recent immigrant communities’ increased lobbying strength, as their numbers swell. Perhaps one day in the distant future, people from any part of the planet will be able to move freely and make a living wherever they can get employment - more or less as citizens of the G82 European Union can do now. Perhaps that will help turn globalization trends from being corporate- driven to being concerned people-driven.

Some problems are already “global” in nature. These include environmental degradation, global warming, extinction of some plants and animals, human right abuses, and trade. Other problems, like education, training, and unemployment, are on their way to acquiring global status. To no one’s surprise, countries are trying to use a global approach to solve their own problems, much like they tried to do in the 2010 Copenhagen conference on global warming. The meddling of corporate vested interests may have been the fundamental reason why no agreement was reached.

I am one of those who immigrated from the global south to the global north, years earlier than some of the children that this study followed. As a new immigrant, I had to struggle against culture shock, as well as employment and educational adjustments. Like some of the children in this study, for a while, I did not understand what people were saying to me, including my instructors. However, they had far more pressing

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problems to attend to than understanding me. Unlike the new immigrant children in this study, I had completed high school, as well as two years of university in three culturally diverse African countries before settling down in Toronto. Therefore, I was in a better position to tackle my adjustment problems. For this reason, I believe that I could identify and understand some of the adjustment problems Trisha - one of the children highlighted in this study - and other African-Canadians had to struggle with. However, I cannot claim that I fully understood the depth and breadth of her and other students' difficulties, for the simple reason that I did not arrive in Canada at the tender age of 11.

By the time this study was conducted, I had both elementary and secondary teaching experience, much of it as a substitute teacher. I should also mention that I was the only person of colour in my cohort during my teacher-training year, and I graduated when demand for teachers in my field was weak. I witnessed my classmates securing full-time jobs within a few months of graduation, while I had to be content with being a substitute teacher for a few years.

At the time of this study, my first-born child had just begun kindergarten. As a result, I had an interest in exploring in depth what my children's future school demands would look like, as well as what kind of demands awaited me as a concerned and fully involved African-Canadian parent.

### GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is an extension of MA thesis work that I completed in 1983. In that work, I surveyed black parents in Toronto on their understanding of the demands of the school system on their children as students and on themselves as parents on the level of identifying what kinds of support needy children were able to get from the school. My MA study suggested that black parents did not initiate much advocacy on behalf of their children. Though apprehensive, these parents trusted that the school system would provide their children with the full range of educational opportunities available to all students. At this time, these parents lacked confidence about approaching teachers and administrators on matters of concern to them regarding their children's educational needs. Consequently, they shied away from advocating on their children's behalf when faced with the presumed authority of their children's teachers.

In the present study, I wanted to look first at how various children's educational needs were being met within the school system. For this study, I decided to focus not only on black children, but on children from a variety of multiethnic backgrounds, in order to provide a comparative view. I wanted to examine the level of student participation in the decision-making processes of the classroom, as a reflection of their awareness of democratic decision-making, and as an indicator of the level of inclusiveness in the curriculum. This would also mean examining the methods of teaching, the selection and range of pedagogical materials and students' own input into the process of developing a curriculum. Much has been written about fading or dropping out at a high school level (Fine 1991; Dei et al 1997). My project sought to trace the roots of disengagement, and therefore to identify the causes of fading or dropping out.

Second, I wanted to investigate the processes through which students are categorized for the purpose of streaming at the elementary level. My intention was to identify the kinds of considerations that went into determining how students are streamed. Formal streaming starts at the high school level. This may be the reason that most studies on streaming have been focused on that level (Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation 1969; Cheng et al 1980; Roberts-Fiati 1996). In fact, I could not locate any study on streaming at the elementary level during my research for this study. Indeed, I chose to work with an elementary classroom for this study to see if I could establish a link between informal streaming at the elementary level and formal streaming at the high school level. Studies published in the 1990s have shown that informal streaming within the Toronto school system starts at the elementary level (Curtis et al, 1992; Roberts-Fiati 1996).

Third, given that the 1970s and 1980s had seen perhaps the strongest parent and community movements demanding education reform in Toronto, I wanted to determine whether or not there had been any trickle-down effect at the school level. Parents wanted more inclusive curriculum and the opening of school doors to parents and community observers in order to have input in the education of their children. I wanted to see how open the doors were, and whether or not parents took the opportunity to increase their participation and visibility at the school level.

Fourth, equally important for me was to examine how the issues of race, class, and gender were addressed in the curriculum and during deliberations inside and outside the classroom. It proved to be much easier to detect how the explicit or stated curriculum addressed or omitted race, class, and gender. However, identifying the "hidden curriculum" and its effect on students proved to be much more complicated. I needed to observe closely what was said and done outside the formal realm. Since ethnographic study is better-suited for such observation, I spent a better part of a year observing classroom deliberations and mingling with children inside and outside the classroom.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Chapter Two reviews relevant literature - both what existed before the study was conducted, but also what has appeared in the intervening years. The chapter tries to locate this study among studies and reports on the subject of diversity in the curriculum and the level of student and parent participation in its deliberations and classroom discourse. Hence, this chapter includes a section where I drew together the key analytical perspectives and concepts that informed the study. Focusing on critical scholarship that is committed to social justice and equity in education, my key concepts include Eurocentrism, racism, inequality, inclusivity, social justice, student-centred, teacher-centred, etc.

Chapter Three describes the methodology I used and provides the rationale for its selection. A description of the school, the observed classroom, the students in it and the school culture in general, and how I gained access to the site are described here.

## CHAPTER 1

Chapters Four through Eight, present and analyze the data gathered in the study. Chapter Four examines the type of curricular material that was used for teaching and learning in the classroom. Here, the curriculum is assessed and evaluated in terms of the way critical issues of race, class and gender are engaged. Chapter Five uses the concept of a continuum to assess the role of the teacher in the classroom. The data presented shows a highly teacher-centred classroom orientation and finds that its structure as a split level classroom makes it that much harder for the teacher to engage the students. When given the opportunity to participate in decision-making, students showed a great deal of ability to lead and organize activities, as proved in the gym and playground. Faced with highly centralized decision-making in the hands of the teacher, students were left resisting passively.

Chapter Six presents the data on parent participation. It highlights the struggle of a black mother against the entire school system. This mother and other parents in similar circumstances struggled to support their children in an effort to close the gap in their children's below grade level achievement, but found the school doors were not open to their input. The school falsely rationalized that the lack of progress in these students' learning was due to their own inherited disabilities. This chapter also shows that those parents who were courageous and knowledgeable enough to advocate for all children were usually co-opted into silence with special privilege treatments.

Chapter Seven shows a trend of privatization within the public school system to accommodate the middle class, while neglecting the educational needs of working class and new immigrant children. It has already been established that some former school boards within Metropolitan Toronto attributed parental or community neglect to the failures of new immigrant black students who arrived in the 1970s to adjust to their new school environments, rather than differential treatment of these students and their non-immigrant peers (Schreiber 1970; Stewart 1975; Roth 1973; Fram et al 1977). However, this study shows that the new breed of failing black students is born in Canada and, therefore, blaming their failure on cultural adjustment problems to a new country does not bear out.

Chapter Eight provides a historical perspective on educational reform from the 1980s to 2010. It chronicles the repeated failed attempts to reform education based on numerous studies and government commissioned reports. The failure to strive for more inclusive education from the 1980s until the present means that marginalized students are more or less in the same position they were in the 1980s.

Chapter Nine starts by summarizing the findings of this study and make some recommendations for reform.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Sometimes words or phrases have slightly different meanings depending on the context in which they are used. Therefore, I include an account of how I am using some terms that are central to this study below.



*Often Used Terms*

*African-Canadian versus black.* Both African Canadian and black are used throughout this study interchangeably. While I prefer to use African-Canadian as a more inclusive term, “black” is also used at times particularly in reference to earlier times, generally covering the time period before the 1990s. In a way, all blacks, whether they immigrated to Canada from the Caribbean, other countries, or directly from Africa are all referred to as African- Canadians. I do not distinguish whether they were brought to Canada as slaves, whether they moved to Canada on their own initiative, as loyalists did from the U.S.A., or if they simply arrived to make Canada their new home; I use the term African-Canadians to designate any and all of these situations. I also prefer this term for its inclusive property, because a non-black Canadian who traces Africa as their ancestral land, could be white or of Asian roots, and could also easily be identified by this tag.

*Drop-backs.* These are students who re-join high school at a later date, after having dropped out in earlier years. Students drop out of school for a variety of reasons starting in grades 7 and 8. After some time, however, they realize it could be a good idea to drop back in to school and complete high school. Some drop-backs were known to have accomplished beyond their high school certificate, as shown in this study, and as my experience as teacher showed me.

*Education versus schooling.* These terms are used interchangeably as if they meant exactly the same thing. Both words capture the ways in which both the stated and the implied (hidden) curriculum and the school setting are established, administered and communicated to all stakeholders, including the students themselves .

*Inclusive education.* An education system within which both the stated and hidden curricula and the ethnic composition of the staff ratio are representative of the diversity of the students. In addition, inclusive education creates a classroom setting, through various means (such as rearranging the desks in the classroom), which invites the full participation of all students. Inclusive education would also enable parents and the community to participate in all aspects of education.

*Student-centred education.* An education system in which teachers and students collaborate in the selection and development of teaching materials, as well as in the delivery of teaching activities, including evaluation schemes. The full involvement of students can also diversify and enrich the curriculum by bringing different traditions and cultures into the classroom.

*Teacher-centred education.* In contrast to student-centred, teacher-centred education installs the teacher as the undisputed authority figure who makes all decisions with respect to the selection of teaching material and the choice and

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delivery of teaching activities. Again, in contrast to student-centred education, teacher-centred education limits the curriculum to a Eurocentric model of learning.

### *Analytical Terms*

*Organic intellectual.* The term was coined by Italian intellectual and progressive leader, Antonio Gramsci. He identified a highly-educated person who could easily be part of the dominant society but chooses instead to identify and condemn the tools of social and economic deprivation used against the downtrodden in society. An organic intellectual is one who identifies and blends with the downtrodden to join them in the fight for justice. As presented later, Paulo Friere identified Ernesto Che Guevara of Argentina and Amilcar Cabral of Guinea Bissau as exemplars of organic intellectuals.

*Passive resistance.* A survival and coping strategy used by elementary and high school students, but mostly by elementary level students. It is a resistance strategy in which students do not openly express their dissatisfaction with the teacher-initiated teaching material and teaching activities - in fact, they appear to accept it. However, behind the scenes, they express their dissatisfaction, whether through simply grumbling in the absence of the teacher or authority figure, or through sharing their dissatisfaction with trusted peers. Passive resistance is shown through a whole host of communicative activities ranging from sharing jokes to a “no snitching” agreement, as presented in Chapter Five.

### *School System Labels*

*Identification, placement, and review committee (IPRC).* The Ministry of Education-mandated committee set up to evaluate and place “exceptional students.” This committee is also in charge of creating an IEP (see below for the meaning of IEP) for each student identified as an “exceptional.”

*Individual education plan (IEP).* According to the Ontario Ministry of Education guidelines developed to explain the provisions of the Education Act, “an IEP is a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student. It identifies learning expectations that are modified from or alternative to the expectations given in the curriculum policy document for the appropriate grade and subject or course, and/or any accommodations and special education services needed to assist the student in achieving his or her learning expectations” (Ontario Ministry Guidelines 2000). Students requiring an IEP could have various abilities ranging from gifted to those with various forms of learning disabilities.

*Ontario student record (OSR).* According to the Ontario Ministry of Education Guidelines, OSR is “the record of a student’s education progress through schools in

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Ontario.” The Education Act requires that the principal of a school collect information “for inclusion in a record in respect of each pupil enrolled in the school and to establish, maintain, retain, transfer and dispose of the record.” An OSR is established for each student who enrolls in a school operated by a school board or the Ministry of Education, and the OSR folder follows the student throughout their elementary and secondary education. Among other things, the OSR folder contains report cards, an Ontario Student Transcript (if applicable), and any identified exceptionalities or special education documentation, such as an IEP. The information contained in the OSR file is used to track a student’s educational history and progress through school.

## CHAPTER 2

### A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is a large literature on the impact of classroom setting on student learning, with the greater portion focused on the teacher and her instructional practices, rather than on the students and their educational needs. However, a large number of studies and theoretical works do focus on the students and their reactions to the curriculum.

The precedent for my study was already set by a number of qualitative and quantitative studies, which successfully framed the context within which students and teachers engage in teaching and learning in school (The Report of the Provincial Committee on the Aims and Objectives of Education in Ontario 1968; Willis 1979; Goodlad 1984; Cullingford 1991; Connell 1993). I consider the relevance of these and other works in relation to four themes: teacher versus student-centred education, transitional difficulties, the connection between passive resistance at the elementary level to fading out/dropping out in high school, and the need for inclusive schooling. These themes consider the classroom environment and its impact on learning, central features of my study.

The first theme in this review chapter examines the literature on understanding teacher-centred versus student-centred education. The second theme deals with the mechanics and steps needed to transform teacher-centred to student-centred education and the obstacles that may occur along the way. The third theme concerns the reaction of students to the discourses of the classroom in the context of both classroom formats, i.e. teacher versus student-centred teaching and learning environments. Finally, I discuss the possibilities of making meaningful changes to create more inclusive classrooms.

#### TEACHER-CENTRED EDUCATION DEFINED

What a teacher-centred classroom looks like and how it operates has been examined by a good number of researchers. In his massive study of both elementary and secondary U.S. schools, John Goodlad described teacher-centred classrooms as follows:

The data from our observations in more than 1,000 classrooms supports the popular image of a teacher standing or sitting in front of a class imparting knowledge to a group of students. Explaining and lecturing constituted the most frequent teaching activities, according to teachers, students, and our observations. (Goodlad 1984:105)

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Goodlad found thirty or so students behind desks arranged in rows, facing the teacher, mostly listening and at times, at least some of them responding. It seems that the situation re-conjured his own memories of school when he states, “A snapshot of such a scene would freeze in time a teacher lecturing and questioning and student in various poses of listening and responding” (Goodlad 1984:105) He did not see students working together cooperatively and helping each other.

Another study conducted in the United Kingdom by Cedric Cullingford (1991) of four elementary and three secondary inner-city schools also found the same format of the classroom, where students sat in rows and listened, and teachers who sat or stood in front of them, taught. In spite of the compelling arguments and discussions disfavoring teacher-centred classrooms since the 1970s, that format of teaching and learning seems to have persisted into the present. This finding is corroborated by many educational researchers covering the time period from the 1970s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see, for example, Hawkins 1974; Willis 1977; Giroux and McLaren 1986; Darder 1991; Delpit 1995; Giroux 2001; Cummins 2003; Fettes 2007). Perhaps Mark Fettes best expresses the current frustrations of those who want to see a faster transformation of the teaching and learning format from teacher-centred to student-centred:

It is a common observation that schools have changed little over the past 100 years or so, in most of the ways that truly matter. Classrooms, pedagogy, curriculum, timetabling, and rewards and punishment- all of these have undergone periodic revision, yet the basic attitudes and beliefs underlying them have proved remarkably resistant to change. (Fettes 2007:126)

The rowed format of the classroom is frozen in time for a reason. Goodlad argues that one of the reasons is economic. It is more expensive to organize the classroom differently, because, among other things, more staff and furniture will be needed. Others point out the most important reason is in fact the desire of the state to maintain power through the teacher maintaining the power to dominate and control his or her students (Freire 1970; Willis 1977; Giroux and McLaren 1986; Cullingford 1991; Darder 1991; Delpit 1995; McLaren 1995; Giroux 2001; Cummins 2003; Tejeda et al. 2003).

Cullingford makes it very clear that nothing will stop students from learning in their own silent ways, but the curriculum presented to them is not a matter of choice. Otherwise “the class is organized by the teacher and the subjects that are being studied are controlled by the teacher” (Cullingford 1991: 138) Lisa Delpit (1995) points out that the publishers of the textbooks used, developers of curriculum materials, and the power of the state also share control of what is taught in the classroom. Cummins (2003), like Giroux and McLaren (1986), contends that the powers in control of education go far beyond teachers and, in fact, the teachers are just as much dominated as the students they teach.

In virtually every country history histories of education reveal a systematic and usually intentional process whereby dominant groups have organized the

structure of educational provision in ways that construct the human differences that children bring to school – differences in race, class, culture, gender, language – as deficits that are invoked as explanation of these children's poor academic performance. (Cummins 2003:41)

For Cummins, it is no accident that classrooms are organized in rows, orienting students towards the teacher. It is a "... pedagogical solution involving more rigorous top-down scripting of teacher-student interactions ... in an attempt to teacher-proof the curriculum" (ibid, 2003:56). To Freire (1970), Giroux (2001), McLaren (1995), and Tejeda et al (2003) it is clear who is in control and dominant, and it goes beyond the teacher to school administrators, school board and ministry of education officials; to political and economic interests. This dominant culture views teachers as primarily technicians or public servants whose role is to implement rather than to conceptualize pedagogy (Giroux and McLaren 1986). However, these scholars do not believe the teachers are totally controlled and helpless in this situation, as will be shown below.

My own experiences, first as an elementary school teacher, and now as a secondary school teacher corroborate the assessments of Cummins, Giroux and McLaren. I see teachers being nagged constantly to implement the Ministry of Education curriculum in a particular way, or to emphasize certain elements of Ministry of Education documents. The constant flow of reminders and directives from principals to teachers to prepare course information and other materials for distribution to students and parents in uniform ways is part of trying to keep teachers scripted. Such demands once prompted a colleague of mine to say, "I feel like I am an assembly line worker rather than a teacher." It is all about formalities, including something as trivial as the cover page of any teacher-produced document, i.e. what information they should or should not have on the cover page, not to mention the emphasis that teachers who teach the same course should teach it in exactly the same way and use the same materials. Luckily, a significant number of teachers choose and teach material in response to their students' unique and evolving needs, which are often much more varied and complex than the prescribed curriculum allows for.

In spite of the multiple control mechanisms inflicted on teachers by Boards of Education, I do not believe that teachers are totally controlled and powerless to modify and tailor their teaching to the needs of their students. Teachers can find room even in state-controlled classrooms to live up to their sense of right and wrong without resorting to open rebellion against their school boards. In this sense, I agree with Giroux and McLaren who write:

...that teachers are bearers of critical knowledge, rules, and values through which they consciously articulate and problematize their relationship to each other, to students, to subject matter, and to the wider community. (Giroux and McLaren 2003:225)

In my line of work, I have witnessed some teachers successfully resist the pressure to act in uniformity with other teachers, and instead to embrace the emancipatory

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possibilities of their work. They were aware enough and brave enough to do so. Of course, teachers are products of their own society, and like any other occupational group, some are more motivated to maintain the status quo, while others are more committed to effecting change.

In failing to resist and do away with teacher-centred education, teachers are bound to become part of the “endullment” process of students, according to Ira Shor, a critical teacher and researcher. In a teacher-centred classroom, students “are told so much but asked to think so little” (Shor 1992:20). Shor argues that this forces them to shut down. He calls this an *endullment process*, which causes students to lose interest in the learning process.

### STUDENT-CENTRED EDUCATION DEFINED

In contrast to teacher-centredness, student-centred education makes the students partners with the teacher in teaching, learning and even in the selection of teaching materials.

Schooling was studied in the U.S. and Britain in the 1960s. Canadian provinces were no exception. Following the examples of the United States and Britain, Ontario launched its own study on schooling in general, and the classroom setting in particular. The resulting report, *Living and Learning, the Report of the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario*, otherwise mostly known as the Hall-Dennis Report, was published in 1968.

The Hall-Dennis report called on nothing short of an overhaul of education in Ontario. The report recommended new areas of emphasis such as “child-centred education,” “meeting the needs of each child” and “small group learning” instead of large classes of 30 or 40 children in a single classroom. Its definition of child-centred education included mainly meeting the needs of each child, learning in small groups and avoiding focusing attention on those who do well. Perhaps the following statement captures the essence of its message adequately:

When schools exhibit a small selected honor roll of students, a price is paid by those who did not make it. Concern should always be felt for the non-team members, the unhonored, the absentees, and the corridor wanderers. A school should serve all its children comfortably and humanely in its on-going, child-centred programs and a learning experience should be found to meet the needs of each. (Hall-Dennis 1968:55)

The Hall-Dennis Report opened up avenues for reforming education in Ontario, and had a lot of influence on actual programming and on how education in general was perceived. Its recommendations created the wall-less (open-concept) and windowless classroom and many schools renamed themselves to add “Community” to the name they had before. For example, “Southview School” became “Southview Community School”. The report ushered in the practice of gathering students into small groups, according to their interests and abilities. It recommended as well that teachers should know more about each child in their classrooms.

However, the Hall-Dennis Report did not look into making teachers, students and parents/communities partners in education. Under its child-centred education mantra, the child remained an object rather than an active participant in his/her own education. The rich diversity of cultures and backgrounds of children in classrooms was never tapped into, and remained ignored. On the contrary, cultural differences were seen as an obstacle to be overcome. According to some critics, the report's recommendations expanded streaming, rather than seeking to limit or reduce it (Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller 1992). The needs of racial minority and working class children were simply not on its agenda. In keeping with the overall goals set by the dominant groups in society, the report expanded vocational schools and programs, most likely a strategy aimed at accommodating the working class. On the other hand, the Hall-Dennis Report became the reason to create a whole host of specialty programs and alternative schools, most of them aimed at accommodating the needs of the "gifted" Gifted designations were promptly sought out by middle-class parents for their children.

The Liberal limitations of the Hall-Dennis Report may have been set from the get go; out of a total membership of 21, the committee included only a token black man; a female perspective was represented by a white woman. There were no members representing the working class. In addition, the report's release was not accompanied with a substantial increase in funding for education, which made it impossible to implement all of its recommendations. All in all, anyone who expected some radical results from the release of this report was bound to be disappointed.

It is helpful to make the distinction between the notion of child-centred education, as espoused by the Hall-Dennis Report, and student-centred education. In a way, the Hall-Dennis Report did not challenge the top-down coercive relationship by which teacher-centred education is governed. Jim Cummins draws a clear distinction between this and student-centred education:

These micro-interactions between educators, student, and communities are never neutral; in varying degrees, they either reinforce coercive relations of power or promote collaborative relations of power. When they reinforce coercive relations of power, they contribute to the disempowerment of culturally diverse students and communities. When they promote collaborative relations of power, the micro-interactions enable educators, students, and communities to challenge the operation of coercive power structures. (Cummins 2003:53)

In other words, the first model is mostly coercive while the second is collaborative. Both Goodlad (1984) and Cullingford (1991), who between them had observed hundreds of classrooms, agree with the distinction Cummins has drawn. Add Willis (1977), Pollard (1985), Connell (1993), and Delpit (1995) into the mix, and one gets a good picture of what student-centred education might look like.

Rather than offer a single definition of student-centred education, it may be more helpful to explain its major components. First, student-centred education recognizes students as partners in their own education, that is, they have a say in what is taught,



how it is taught, and therefore decision-making in the classroom is continually negotiated and renegotiated among teacher and students. There is nothing more satisfying than watching students vigorously debate issues with one another and with their teacher in the classroom. Student-centred education recognizes that students learn about and from each other in the process of interacting with one another. The flip side of this is that students are given explanations as to why they learn certain things and how they learn them, with possible negotiations between teacher and students and students and students (Dewey 1966, Freire 1970, Goodlad 1984, Cullingford 1991, Delpit 1995, Miller 2002). In my own experience, many times after I have proposed a course of action for the day or a few days to come in a classroom, some students have expressed opposition. Soon, other students joined in expressing their opinion, some supporting me, some supporting proposals by fellow students. I have dealt with this by putting the matter to a quick vote or simply taking a hint to scrap it or go with it.

Second, a student-centred format recognizes that students are entitled to embrace and share their own indigenous knowledges and cultures. Indeed, a total respect for their indigenous knowledges and cultures is a fundamental part of their basic human rights, and therefore classroom lessons and daily routines will reflect who they are. Of course, a student-centred education should also allow students to question and challenge oppressive elements in all cultural practices. This means that race, gender, class, ethnic, and sexuality concerns are foremost in student-centred education. As R.W. Connell put it, “The issue of social justice is not an add-on. It is fundamental to what good education is all about” (Connell 1993:15). Many researchers have likewise suggested social justice is one of the main goals of education (see Freire 1970, Hawkind 1974, Willis 1977, Delpit 1995, McLaren 1995, Dei et al 1997).

Third, the student-centred format exposes students to a broader range of learning strategies than does teacher-centred, from full class discussions and debates, to working in small groups or pairs. Together, with one another and with their teacher, they set group goals and learning objectives. Of course, this does not do away with periodic individual learning efforts and explanations and lectures from the teacher (Goodlad 1984, Cullingford 1991, Shor 1992).

Lastly, having students talk to one another requires reorganizing the classroom set-up in different configurations than rows, as Goodlad has suggested. It is important to give students a full view of one another so that they can read each other’s facial expressions and reactions to exchanges of ideas (Goodlad 1984). Some teachers who experiment with student-centred programming prefer a rectangular set up of the desks, others use a square or a circle; still others use various creative shapes. I personally prefer a horse-shoe shape. When I step into the centre of the room, I am literally a few feet away from each student (Sium, unpublished manuscript, 2009). Proximity, I find, is important to maintain engagement of students, not only with the teacher, but also among themselves.

Again, in spite of the decades-old debates about the value of student-centred education, the teacher-centred model of transmission of information and skills

remains the most predominant mode of instruction (Goodlad 1984, Cullingford 1991). Dewey wondered why schools continued to teach by “pouring in” knowledge into passive students, despite the fact that this was universally criticized as a method of teaching (Dewey 1966). Freire picked up on his criticism of the pouring-in method a decade later (Freire 1970). The problem of students sitting in rows, passively absorbing knowledge is still with us (Cummins 2003, Wood 2006, Fettes 2007, Stout 2007). A rough and quick check of three high schools in Toronto had fewer than 5% of the classrooms set up in anything other than rows of desks. I had the opportunity to visit these high schools during the 2009/2011 academic year, and I did go and check in every hallway and every corner. If one assumes a high correlation between teacher-centred education and rows of desks, then not much change has occurred towards a more student-centred pedagogy.

Examining what is being taught is the second major building block of this study. Do the textbooks, handouts and, in today’s world, search engines used within and outside of the classroom focus on the concerns and interests of all students? Are equity and diversity issues adequately addressed? Or have they remained essentially Eurocentric and elitist in their content?

The commonly prevailing public perception of public schools seems to be that schooling activities in general and textbooks in particular serve the interests of all students equally well, and that they do not favour any one social group over another. Contrary to public perception, extensive studies carried out in the United States found that social studies textbooks, both at the elementary and secondary levels, were biased in favour of the dominant groups in society, and against women, racial minorities, the working class, and other marginalized social groups (Fox and Hess 1972, Harrington 1976, Shaver 1977, Anyon 1978, 1979 1980). These studies found that much of this bias is achieved by omission, and found the textbooks to be unrealistically optimistic about the American political system. The texts describe the American political system as overwhelmingly consensual. Shaver found that the textbooks failed to provide students with the tools for critical thought or informed participation in democratic society.

Anyon examined the identity of those who take it upon themselves to control the message channeled to all students.

Textbooks are social products that can be examined in the context of their time, place and function. Those produced in this country (United States) are designed and marketed by a publishing industry that is big business – annual sales of several billion dollars – and that increasingly is owned by corporate conglomerates. (Anyon 1979:361)

The situation here in Canada is not any better than that of the United States. This is not surprising, as the same American conglomerates play a big part here in Canada in the textbook publishing business and in the packaging of the message, both at the elementary and secondary levels. I will return to this issue in Chapter Four.

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On a related matter, a survey of staff and students conducted in 2007 by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), under the title of Demographic Components of Employees and Students found that two-thirds of students said that “the curriculum does not include them” (TDSB 2007). Given that the same survey also found that nearly 70% of students in Toronto are members of visible minorities, the survey’s findings echo the American findings cited above. In fact, I found in my study that the overwhelming majority of the books used in the research site were published in the United States.

Earlier studies conducted in the 1970s, 80s and 90s by the former Board of Education for the City of Toronto found similar imbalances (Wright 1971; Wright and Tsuji 1984; Yau et al 1993). These findings were corroborated by my research. In spite of a constantly increasing multiculturalization of society, the corporate and dominant culture interests are not reflecting the realities of the majority students and the communities in which they live.

That change is an elusive process is no secret. The question is what does the literature say about the frustrating attempts at change in education? Are there theories that have tried to explain why there is a stalemate? Who are the formidable forces against change?

Studies, books and papers from Australia, Britain and the United States have identified economic interests as the dominant forces frustrating efforts towards educational change. These studies make it clear that controlling the educational system is part of a strategy that ensures continued capital domination (Althusser 1971, Blauner 1972, Almaguer 1974, Bowles and Gintis 1976, Willis 1977, Barrera 1979, Tejeda et al 2003).

In introducing their theory, Tejeda et al write:

...the contemporary United States is essentially characterized by an internal neo-colonialism that has its origins in the mutually reinforcing systems of colonial and capitalist domination and exploitation that enslaved Africans and dispossessed indigenous populations throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. (2003:11)

Since the motivation for colonization was the acquisition of free and cheap labour, raw material and markets, it makes sense for capital to keep control of the internal scene. Thus any groups that endeavour to bring educational change will have to be frustrated.

Jean Anyon contends that corporate conglomerates control the school material publishing world. It is part of that internal neo-colonialist control, exercised by the powers that be in the United States of America that Tejeda et al (2003), Almaguer (1974), Barrera (1979), and Blauner (1972) present. When you think of it, corporate America’s strategy reaches far beyond preserving simple cultural privileges of dominant groups. According to Tejeda et al’s theory, maintaining economic domination is at the root of the problem of the lack of change toward social justice.

In his theoretical model of *domination and contestation*, Giroux presents the school as a site where domination is reproduced by the dominant forces. He writes: "...it is crucial to see schools as social sites in which the class, gender, and racial relationships that characterize the dominant society are roughly reproduced" (Giroux 1981: 63). He adds, "...it is equally important to make such an analysis function in the interest of developing alternative pedagogical practice" (ibid., 63). Thus, under his model, there is some room for optimism. However, not only domination but also resistance forces are counter-contested in their effort to change the system. This explains why change is slow, and at times, quite bruising. It is bruising because the dominant culture and those who fight for change go back and forth resisting each other. Educational theorist P. McLaren has corroborated Giroux's findings and offered more insights into the dynamics of the school as a site of domination and contestation (McLaren 1998).

There are those who concur with Giroux and McLaren's arguments about schools as sites of domination and contestation. In their view, cultural invasion comes before economic domination (Freire 1970, Willis 1977, Connell 1993, Stout 2003, Howard 2006). According to Freire, the invaders impose their views upon the dominated, inhibiting their creativity and curbing their expression:

For cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority. Since everything has its opposite, if those who are invaded consider themselves inferior, they must necessarily recognize the superiority of the invaders. The values of the latter thereby become the pattern for the former. The more invasion is accentuated and those invaded are alienated from the spirit of their own culture and from themselves, the more the latter want to be like the invaders: to walk like them dress like them, talk like them. (Freire 1970:153)

Freire has made it clear here that the deeper the reach of the invasion, the more disoriented the invaded get. It follows that mounting emancipatory resistance becomes harder.

In his book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multicultural Schools*, Gary R. Howard identifies the Judeo-Christian worldview as a tool first for domination, and now as an obstacle in the struggle for change. He quotes the Bible to make his point on the pronouncement of the truth on the simple fact that the all-knowing God is leading, and humanity is merely following. How much more determinist could things get than that? He writes:

Christianity further restricted the parameters of truth and chosenness by establishing their Messiah as the single arbiter at the gates of heaven. No one entered paradise except through him. ...and since the church hierarchy was so vociferously patriarchal, at least half of humankind, namely women, were preemptively eliminated from the inner circle of authority and power. (Howard 2006: 36)

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In this day in age, among the old and ultraconservative Coptic Orthodox churches of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Egypt, women are not allowed to set foot in the inner-sanctums of their churches. It is too holy for women to enter. Among others, this is the kind of legitimizing authority that has to be challenged. However, counter-contestation may follow and delay the materialization of change. There is a popular saying in South Africa, which originated during the apartheid era referring to the white tribes that settled there in the seventeenth century: “When they came, we had the land and they had the Bible. Now they have the land and we have the Bible.” The Judeo-Christian tradition was used to gain economic and political domination upon unsuspecting peoples.

There are other equally entrenched, but perhaps easily identifiable obstacles to educational change. The dominant groups in society control the availability of funding. The point has been made, again and again, that more educational funding is always going to be needed to implement change. Delay tactics, or even derailing tactics include shifts in concerns about what the educational system should do or should not do. In the 1980s and 90s in Ontario, for example, just at the time when activists for change made equity a focal issue for changing educational policy and practice, dominant groups brought in concerns about “quality, performance, standards, efficiency, accountability and parental choice” in education (Dehli 1994:8). In many ways, equity’s concerns with accountability and community involvement were absorbed into an agenda that entrenched educational inequality. Other researchers have echoed this view of recent educational “developments” in Ontario (Dei et al 1997, Kerr 2006, McCaskell 2005).

Some researchers identify the limiting factor of lack of diversity in the teaching and administration of education. Lack of diversity is presented as a hindrance to progress towards emancipatory education (Darder 1991, Delpit 1995, Portelli and Solomon 2001, Howard 2006). The fact is that the overwhelming majority of educators come from the culturally dominant group, namely white, Judeo-Christian, male, and heterosexual, and many are neither interested nor take the time to find out and know more about the majority of their students, who happen to be poor and visible minorities. Howard provides an example of the aboriginal people in Australia:

In Australia, for example, most White Australians have very little personal contact with Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people, on the other hand, for their very survival, have had to cultivate a deep understanding of White Australians. Since the early days of British invasion, Aboriginal people have been studious observers of moods, quirks, rituals, and emotions of the White colonial psyche. (Howard 2006:62)

Here in Toronto, a TDSB survey of 2007 found that while over 70% of the teachers in Toronto classrooms were white, almost 70% of the students were not. It is no surprise that students felt that they were not learning about themselves. The question is, how long will it take to make it a requirement for educators to educate themselves on the cultures and lived experiences of their students?

FROM PASSIVE RESISTANCE TO 'FADING OUT'

Although it is a widely known that schools are run by dominant social and economic groups in society, there is a knowledge by social activists that domination is never complete, and can be contested and challenged with some success. Social resistance theory is articulated by many theorists (among many others, see Willis 1977, Everhart 1983, Giroux 1983, 2001, McLaren 1989, 1994, 1995). Perhaps it will suffice to take Giroux's articulation of what resistance theory is. According to Giroux:

The notion of resistance points to the need to understand more thoroughly the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint... What is highlighted here is that power (as exercised by the dominant group over the subordinate) is never one dimensional; it is exercised not only as a mode of domination, but also as an act of resistance or even as an expression of a creative mode of culture and social production outside the immediate force of domination. ... (Therefore) inherent in a radical notion of resistance is an expressed hope, an element of transcendence, for radical transformation. (Giroux 2001:108)

Resistance theory postulates that schools are sites where domination is attempted, but also contested. Embedded in this idea is the notion that schooling is analyzed as a "social process," one in which different social groups both accept and reject the complex mediation of the act of domination "that gives form and meaning to the process of schooling." Giroux adds "...it is crucial to see schools as social sites in which the class, gender, and racial relationships that characterize the dominant society are roughly reproduced" (Giroux 2001:63).

What separates resistance theory from others, such as structural theory and the theory of reproduction, is that it is more optimistic and provides a framework for discriminated groups to fight for inclusive education and emancipation. It is understood in resistance theory that teachers also resist attempts to script their role in the classroom (Giroux and McLaren 1986, Cummins 2003). However, the focus of this study is student resistance.

The central concern of my study is: what form does student resistance take and how organized is it? Could it be described as active or passive resistance?

Most of the available studies on student resistance deal with high school students. Therefore, I have taken a bit of a risk in choosing to examine how elementary school students, specifically, students in grades five and six, resist. I was interested in what specific forms their resistance takes in a teacher-centred classroom.

Interestingly, none of the identified studies on student resistance starts with a clear definition of what is considered to be active or passive resistance. Although they talk about both active and passive resistance extensively, their definitions are more implied rather than explicitly stated. I believe it will be useful for my work to begin with a definition of both active and passive resistance.

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In this study, active resistance is defined as a student's stated disagreement with the official or authorized opinion on any issue. The disagreement may or may not be accompanied by an act of defiance such as non-compliance with, refusal, verbal challenge or taunting of figures in school authority, particularly teachers. It is from this perspective that one has to understand students' decisions to act out, drop out, fade out, and drop back or, on the contrary, to stick it out and excel in their education in spite of adversities - as an act of resistance.

Inversely, my definition for passive resistance is unstated disagreement with the teacher or other school authority figure, which may or may not include sharing the disagreement with trusted classmates, close friends, or even seeking parental advocacy. At times, but not always, passive resistance in students may be accompanied by certain body language. Among others, the short-term survival strategies of passively resisting students include appearing as though they are striding along, but not embracing their school experiences fully.

Based on my ethnographic observations, I suggest that resistance at the elementary level is mostly passive – in contrast to the high school level, where it is more active. Other than not wishing to offend their teachers, when push comes to shove, most high school students have no fear of expressing their disagreements. Take the example from Willis' study of a teacher ordering one of her students to take all the rings off his fingers. He answered (why don't you) "take yours off as well" (as for mine) "you'll have to chop my finger off first" (Willis 1977:11). This is an example of active high school resistance, which may not be expected from a typical elementary level student.

Some researchers suggest that student resistance is disorganized, in that it is limited to individualized expressions of nonconformity, creativity, or just acting out (Apple 1985). Not so, say Miron and Lauria (1998), who studied two high schools in the Southern United States. They write:

By contrast, we illustrate how much more is going on in the new social spaces of inner-city public schools and classrooms in the form of student collective forms of resistance. By collective we mean those struggles and antagonisms that are ideologically organized around racial solidarity and linked to categories of social identity, especially racial/ethnic identity. (Miron and Lauria 1998:190)

Michael Apple is right about one thing: student resistance at the elementary school level remains unorganized. This might be attributed to the young age of elementary school students. At a high school level, it appears that many students have achieved the cognitive abilities to identify and the social confidence to openly defy the authority of their teachers. There is a whole lot of literature that support Miron and Lauria's conclusions about the nature of student resistance at the high school level (Pollard 1985, Woods 1983, Sium 1987, McCaskell 2005).

Andrew Pollard suggests recognizing students' power to resist is an important precondition to good teaching. According to Pollard, the key to successful teaching is that "both students and teachers must recognize the basic concerns of



the other” (Pollard 1985:8), otherwise teachers will end up contributing towards the process of social differentiation through their daily practices and classroom routines. For Pollard, all classroom activities have to be negotiated between the teacher and the students. Peter Woods goes further, suggesting that “students take their own sanctions against teachers just as teachers do against students” (Woods 1983:128).

There is a rich history of student-organized resistance movements in Toronto starting from the 1970s. High school students took on not only individual schools and some teachers in them, but also, in some cases, the entire school board, and in doing so, they managed to be part of the driving force for change (Sium 1987, McCaskell 2005). I found none of these kinds of resistance at the elementary school where I conducted my study. It is important to note that not all high school student resistance is as organized and as active as Miron and Lauria seem to suggest. I believe that a larger proportion of high school student resistance remains under the surface.

To summarize, this study is concerned with the question of how elementary school students resist when they feel ignored, and feel that their educational needs are not being met. This study will illustrate how, in one elementary school – specifically at the grade five and six levels – students struggle and suffer alone with their minds full of unanswered questions. At times, they may share their distress with close friends, though rarely for the purpose of forming a united front with them. The response of students in my study to their dissatisfaction with classroom practices was mostly relegated to individually-initiated passive resistance. The options for response for dissatisfied high school students are a lot broader in range than for those available to most elementary schools students. By high school, sometimes dissatisfied students determine that nobody cares, and therefore they just fade out, or drop out in dramatic fashion because, unlike elementary level students, they can (Fine 1991, Dei et al 1997). At other times, the neglect and discrimination they face fuels their courage and determination to stick it out and complete their education (Woods 1983, Pollard 1985, Miron and Lauria 1998).

#### MY INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FRAMEWORK

In my work as an elementary school teacher in the early 1980s, it dawned on me what it would take to equitably educate all children from all kinds of backgrounds and from almost every continent on the planet, all crammed in one classroom. By then, the Hall-Dennis Report (1968) had witnessed its full effects and proved to marginalize working class and racial minority students further, by intensifying differentiation, streaming and opening up privileged programs and schools for middle-class children. For me, the publications of Bowls and Gintis (1976) and Paul Willis (1977) provided the antithesis to the Hall-Dennis Report. Questions were asked and answers sought to determine what it would take to educate all children equally. The whole idea of conducting my study, therefore, was inspired by the concept of *inclusive education*.



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Inclusive education is simply understood to be a system of education which provides equal educational opportunities to all children. Part and parcel of inclusive education are remedial and compensatory programs that cater to those who come from disadvantaged situations. Conducting this type of study in the setting where it took place brought to life the challenges that new immigrant, racial minority, working class boys and girls faced on daily basis.

The literature on inclusive education is quiet extensive. I agree with Giroux and McLaren that schools are social sites where domination is exerted by cultural and economic dominant groups, but this domination is also contested by the forces of resistance. I further agree with Paulo Freire (1970, 1998) that the forces of resistance are capable of mounting a dialogical praxis not only to successfully resist the anti-dialogical practices of domination, but also to change the system so that it will equitably serve all sectors of society, including those ignored or discriminated against on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences and disability of all types.

When one thinks of the steps that have to be taken and the conditions that have to be set to achieve inclusive education, perhaps it is nothing short of a revolution. If so, it would be a grassroots revolution rather than the kind that happens with top to bottom oriented leadership. This type of revolution will energize democracy and not curtail it in the way that others have done hitherto.

This study identifies three conditions that need to be established to allow inclusive education to be realized.

First, students have to be invited and encouraged to be partners in shaping the curriculum, teaching and learning. Second, the doors of the school have to be wide open to make students' lived experiences part of the curriculum, teaching and learning. Lastly, the aims of teacher education training programs have to be redirected to equip teacher candidates with critical thinking and analytical skills that will allow them to be able to embrace the first two steps.

### STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CURRICULUM, TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Eurocentric curriculum has been used as a tool of domination ever since formal public education was introduced in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. To break this stranglehold, and usher in inclusive education, part of the strategy has to be to bring students' lived experiences into schools through the critical involvement of students (see among others Freire and Faundez 1989, McLaren 1995, Freire 1997, Giroux 2001, Tejeda et al 2003, Howard 2006). This would mean that the organization of the classroom has to be transformed to encourage student-centred relations and students will have to be viewed as instrumental (not incidental) in bringing their cultures and that of their communities' into the classroom, with the aim of reshaping the curriculum.

In conversation with one another, Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez (1989) provide tremendous insights into the production of knowledge and the power of dialogue between students and teachers in the classroom. Faundez tells Freire:

But none of us possesses the truth. It is to be found in the “becoming” of dialogue. As Hegel said: “The true reality is becoming.” It is not being or not being, but the tension between them – what is true is the historical process. Thus, when you put forward the idea that “truth lies in the quest and not in the result”, that it is a process, that knowledge is a process, and thus we should engage in it and achieve it through dialogue, through breaking with the past – that is not accepted by the great majority of students, who are used to the teacher, the wise man, having the truth, hierarchically, and thus do not accept dialogue. For them dialogue is a sign of weakness on the part of the teacher; for them modesty in knowledge is an indication of weakness and ignorance. (Freire and Faundez 1989:32)

Thus the move from “pouring in” the truth to students’ minds to the production of the truth through dialogue and interaction of cultures and various histories is going to be challenged not only by a good number of teachers, but also by a good number of students. Be that as it may, I would argue that student-centred organization is a prerequisite for dialogical forms of teaching. There cannot be fair dialogue unless it is accompanied by teacher readiness to welcome students’ challenges and interjections at any stage of the teaching and learning process.

The road to remaking an emancipatory curriculum has been studied by many researchers. I will limit myself here to discussing two models, one advocated by McLaren (1995) and the other by Tejeda et al (2003). Both have tackled the challenge of how students’ lived culture might be made an integral part of the curriculum. McLaren (1995) uses the abundantly available resource of multiculturalism as a vehicle to achieve *inclusive education* or, as Freire and Giroux would say, *emancipatory education*. The rich multicultural mix that both Canada and the United States enjoy could and should come alive and reclaim its fair share of the curriculum in place of a narrow Eurocentrism. However, according to McLaren, not all philosophies of multiculturalism are equipped to serve as a vehicle for change. He identifies *critical* and *resistance multiculturalism* as adequate concepts not only for resistance, but also for winning against domination. He sets apart critical and resistance multiculturalism from conservative, liberal and left-liberal types of multiculturalism. The last three types are identified by McLaren as not so useful, or even themselves tools of domination, especially in the case of conservative multiculturalism.

McLaren’s critical resistance multiculturalism model comes with an action plan attached to it, which in a way describes what the model is. First, he suggests the educational system needs to go far beyond admitting one or two Latin American or African-American books into the canon of great works. In his own words, “*we need to legitimize multiple traditions of knowledge*” (McLaren 1995:134) (emphasis his). Secondly, he suggests that teachers should be required to “interrogate the discursive presuppositions that inform their curriculum practice with respect to race, class, gender, and sexual orientation” (ibid). Any bias in the curriculum should not pass

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unchallenged. Third, “what is perceived as the inherent superiority of whiteness and Western rationality needs to be displaced” (ibid). At the same time, critical educators should not allow conservative pundits to equate “any attack on Western culture [as] an attack on being American” (McLaren 1995:136)) (or, in our case, as an attack on being Canadian). The fourth point has to do with the way curriculum material itself is produced; curriculum reform should mean affirming voices of the oppressed. He adds, “... teachers need to give the marginalized and the powerless a preferential option. Thus, students must be encouraged to produce their own oppositional readings of curriculum content” (ibid). Finally, to give all the above curriculum reform steps a favorable ground, curriculum reform must recognize:

...the importance of encouraging spaces for the multiplicity of voices in our classroom and creating a dialogical pedagogy in which subjects see others as subjects and not as objects. When this happens, students are more likely to participate in history than become its victims. (McLaren 1995:137-138)

Tejeda’s (et al) (2003) model of curriculum reform approaches the road to inclusive education from domination through a neocolonial perspective. They borrow heavily from Blauner (1972), Almaguer (1974), and Barrera (1979) on a notion of social justice that recognizes the contemporary United States is essentially characterized by an “internal neocolonialism” that has its origins in the “mutually reinforcing systems of colonial and capitalist domination and exploitation that enslaved Africans and dispossessed indigenous populations throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries” (Tejeda et al. 2003:11). Further, they agree with Barrera who stated in his theory of structural discrimination that what began as colonial domination before the nineteenth century became internal colonialism, which he defined as “...a form of colonialism in which the dominant and subordinate populations are intermingled, so that there is not geographically distinct metropolis separate from the colony” (Barrera 1979:194).

Tejeda et al. further postulate that over time, as vulgar and in your face discrimination changed to more subtle ways of maintaining inequalities, internal colonialism gave way to internal neocolonialism. They set the stage for change by connecting with Marx and Engels (1984) for their hopeful belief in the ability of the oppressed to liberate themselves. They echo Freire (1970) and McLaren (1998), who argue that winning the consciousness of the oppressed is a necessary condition for emancipatory action, and on the tenets of critical pedagogy respectively. With that, they lay out their *curriculum content of a decolonizing pedagogy* through praxis, which they define as, “guided action aimed at transforming individuals and their world that is reflected upon and leads to further action” (Tejeda et al. 2003:16).

In outlining their decolonizing model, Tejeda et al. identify the subject matter of a decolonizing pedagogy – what teachers and students engage in when performing their decolonizing pedagogical praxis to teach and learn from each other. They write:

We contend that developing a critical consciousness of our internal neocolonial condition and its possible transformation is fundamental to what teachers and students do in decolonizing pedagogical spaces. This requires explicit attention to the history and contemporary manifestations of internal neocolonialism in a manner that clearly explicates their social origin and rejects their historical consequence. It also introduces students to robust theories and conceptual frameworks that provide them the analytical tools to excavate history and examine the present. It is a pedagogical content that must be guided by a conceptually dynamic worldview and a set of values that are anticapitalist, antiracist, antisexist, and antihomophobic. (Tejeda et al 2003:33)

It is clear that they agree with Freire's dialogical praxis; like Freire, they contend that school is a social site where domination is both imposed and contested. What seems to be a weakness in Tejeda et al.'s model is that it is not clear where and how the struggles of the working class and women fit into their suggested pedagogical content. Other than mentioning anti-capitalist and anti-sexist action in the above quote, the overall discussion that preceded the core of the model (as captured by the above quote) did not include mention of these resistance movements. In other words, Tejeda's model did not clarify how the working class and women on one hand, and indigenous peoples, African-Americans and other minorities on the other, might prepare the common ground for a joint struggle. However, I do not think the usefulness of their model is reduced by this omission. I think that their curriculum reform could as easily be anti-capitalist, as it relates to the whole working class, and anti-sexist.

#### TRAINING AND THE RECOGNITION OF TEACHERS AS INTELLECTUAL WORKERS

The second component of my inclusive education framework has to do with the way in which teacher candidates are trained in their initial teacher education programs and beyond. One has to question what the training programs they go through to become teachers actually prepare them for. In a way, how teachers are trained by and large is dependent on how they are viewed, and what is expected of them.

I have already suggested that the dominant culture views teachers as technicians who lecture based on teacher-proof and prepackaged curriculum material. Resistance theorists on the other hand, view teachers as potential contributors to an inclusive education.

Paulo Freire (2005) has a clear view of teachers. He sees them as cultural workers. In order to empower themselves and their students, he suggests that "teachers should always stick together" (2005:12). He believes in teacher empowerment through a continual desire to learn and constant and open curiosity. He adds:

Empowerment includes, for example, teachers' refusal to blindly follow prepackaged educational materials produced by some experts in their offices

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to unequivocally demonstrate their authoritarianism. The development of the so-called teacher-proof materials is a continuation of experts' authoritarianism, of their total lack of faith in the possibility that teachers can know and can also create. (Freire 2005:15)

Indeed, if teachers are capable of knowing, then together with their students, they can create curriculum material, replace the tools of domination, and challenge prepackaged curriculum material.

Giroux and McLaren (1986) for their part agree with Dewey (1903/1977), who believed school could be and should be turned into a *democratic public sphere*. The implication here is that no group is justified in having a dominant role in determining the outcomes of education, which leaves the door for resistance wide open. Parallel to that, Giroux and McLaren view teachers "as not just intellectuals but transformative intellectuals" (Giroux and McLaren 1986:226). That is, "...teachers are bearers of critical knowledge, rules, and values through which they consciously articulate and problematize their relationship; to each other, to students, to subject matter, and to the wider community" (ibid., p. 225) and that is contrary to how the dominant culture views them, as shown above. However, Giroux and McLaren identify one big stumbling block when they explain why teachers are not playing their critical role as teachers of all students and not just the middle-class. They identify teacher training institutions as one of the weakest links. They explain how teacher training programs are failing teachers by not equipping prospective teachers with what they will need to respond to the needs of all of the students in their classrooms. They write:

...most teacher education programs have been, and continue to be, entirely removed from a vision and a set of practices dedicated to the fostering of critical democracy and social justice. A repeated criticism made by educators working within the radical tradition has been that, as it currently exists teacher education rarely addresses either the moral implications of societal inequalities within our present form of industrial capitalism or the ways in which schools function to reproduce and legitimate these inequalities. (Giroux and McLaren 1986:227)

On the other hand, that may not be the message the prepackaged dominant curriculum material wants to convey to prospective teachers. Instead, they offer the impression that "classroom culture is essentially free from ambiguity and contradictions" and prospective teachers are "instructed to view schooling as a neutral terrain devoid of power and politics" (Ibid). Based on that erroneous presumption, teachers are advised to be on the watch for racism, sexism, homophobia, and bias against the disabled and the working class coming into the classroom via students. No mention is made of the fact that the prepackaged dominant curriculum material is rife with racial, gender, sexual and class bias, as will be shown later in this study.

There is no shortage of analysts who agree with Giroux and McLaren on this, most of them with impeccable experience in teaching and researching in education,

#### A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

ranging in time of publication from the 1980s to the current era (among others see Goodlad 1984, Shor 1992, Delpit 1995, Solomon & Allen 2001, Howard 2006). These experts argue that teacher training programs should prepare teacher candidates for a student-centred educational system, in which students are partners in the creation of the curriculum and the teaching and learning, as presented above.

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# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I started my life in Canada in 1976. I consider myself fortunate to have high school as well as half of my undergraduate studies done in Africa. By then having read a bit of critical social scientists had implanted certain level of awareness of the social structure of any society.

As a black person I live under a constant reminder as to who I am by institutions and individuals representing institutions which represent the dominant culture. Therefore, resistance and looking for transformative opportunities has become part of my regular thought process and endeavor for change. That created within me a strong desire for inclusiveness.

Therefore, my study was inspired by the concept of inclusive education. Of course inclusive education does not come readymade; it has to be built. Some of those building blocks were identified in the previous chapter. It was presented that school is a social site where domination is exerted by cultural and economic dominant groups, but this domination is also contested by the forces of resistance (Giroux and McLaren 2003). As Apple calls it school is "... a place for action" (Apple 2009: 42). What is more, the forces of resistance are capable of mounting a dialogical praxis capable of changing the system (Freire 1970, 1998). Again, the recognition of school as a social site, where multiple voices clash or coexist as well as a site where resistance can win is important. Thus, there is no surprise that I found critical ethnographic genre most suited for my project.

Scores of other researchers have offered their understanding of critical ethnography, also known as critical pedagogy. Roger Simon and Donald Dippo present critical ethnography as, "...a form of knowledge production which supports transformative as well as interpretive concern" (Simon and Dippo 1986:1). By way of providing a roundabout definition of critical ethnography, Phil Frances Carspecken said:

Those of us who openly call ourselves "criticalists" definitely share a value orientation. We are all concerned about social inequalities, and we direct our work toward positive social change. We also share a concern with social theory and some of the basic issues it has struggled with since the nineteenth century. These include the nature of social structure, power, culture, and human agency. We use our research, in fact, to refine social theory rather than merely to describe social life. Together, we have begun to develop critical research. (Perspecken 1996:3)

It suffices to mention a partial list of the numerous researchers who agree with Perspecken and Simon and Dippo (Quantz and O'Connor 1988, Connell 1993,

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McLaren 1993, Kincheloe and McLaren 1994, Goldstein 2003, Anyon 2005, Dehli 2008, Apple 2009).

To summarize, the critical ethnography genre is about relating research and linking the findings to a course of action for change in support of those who endure the injustices in society imposed by the dominant group. All in all, I see it as enabling tool for dominated groups to successfully resist and bring about change.

The rest of this chapter will proceed with a description of the research setting through which data was obtained for this study, and the process of gaining access to the research site, followed by a short profile of the school and its students. It then provides the rationale for the research methodology and the timing of the data collection process. This is followed by an explanation of the data analysis scheme, and reflections on the data and the different groups of participants analyzed in the data.

#### RESEARCH SETTING

Southview Community School looked very impressive, both from the outside and inside. The building appeared to be well-maintained, well-endowed with resources, and impressively organized. I would imagine this could have been very reassuring for new immigrant parents, particularly those from the Global South.

The school-community offered diverse neighbourhoods, ranging from some of the most expensive single-family homes, to attached starter homes, peppered with low-rise and old apartment buildings. Though it offered some of the most reasonably-priced apartments in the city, the area did not have social housing units in it in the 1980s. Since then, a few social housing apartment buildings have been erected. In other words, the neighbourhood is accessible to people from all income groups. It is also a home to a considerable number of new immigrants.

However, most new immigrant families in the school community lived temporarily in rented low-rise apartments or converted rental homes until they secured subsidized public housing wherever they could get it. In fact, some of the participants in the study were commuting daily from as far as North York and East York due to recent residence relocation. Others moved into the neighbourhood to take advantage of the availability of starter homes. I got the impression that such households wanted to raise their children away from subsidized public housing elsewhere, housing that they themselves had lived in when they were newer immigrants.

There was a noticeable reflection in the school of the Canadian immigration policy in the 1980s in relation to ethnicity and time of immigration to Canada. The most recent immigrant students at Southview Community School in general, and among the participants in this study in particular, were African-Canadians [from the Caribbean?] and South Americans, and the oldest were Europeans. Asians arrived in the period in between, starting in the mid-1970s. The South Americans were the exception to the above immigration pattern. Their arrival coincided with those of the African-Canadians from the Caribbean. Unlike the above groups, who were



economic migrants by and large, the South Americans arrived in Canada to escape political upheavals, such as in Chile and various other Central American countries.

Southview is a new school. The old school sat on the current playground and was torn down about a decade ago, and a new one was built in its place. It happened to be built at a time when community involvement in schooling was being advocated and hence the concept “community school” was born. In fact, it became a trend in some former Metropolitan Toronto school boards to rename schools “community schools” - particularly in the former Toronto and York Region school boards.

My first day to venture into the classroom as a researcher was Tuesday, October 15, 1985. The principal and I chatted in her office until the opening exercises (the playing of the national anthem and announcements) were done and class started.

I was absolutely impressed by the set up of the classroom. It was completely carpeted. The only external wall, with two uncharacteristically tiny windows, was on the north side of the room, with a partial internal wall on the east side, to which the chalk board was bolted, covering most of the length of the northern half of the classroom. The teacher’s desk sat at a corner, between both walls. However, there was a gap leading to the next classroom behind Mrs. Peterson’s desk. Thus the teachers in the adjacent classrooms could see each other and communicate if they wanted to.

The classroom was the size of two regular classrooms. What I can call the formal part of the classroom was on the north side of the room, at a 45 degree angle to the teacher’s desk. It was filled with student desks, with benches for seats, arranged in rows at a 45 degree angle in relation to the large teacher’s desk. The southern half of the room is what I would call the informal part of the classroom, and the eastern wall did not extend to cover it. When the principal and I walked in that first day, the class was sitting on the floor sharing “News Time.” Students talked about the news as Mrs. Peterson moderated, sitting on a beautiful wooden rocking chair, the only furniture in that part of the classroom. Several students took turns to tell their news of the day, gathered mainly from TV newscasts.

The south side of the classroom was open, and one could see people passing through to the library or other classrooms. The entire length of the long western side of the room was divided by about five foot tall partitions, and a long row of drawers and filing cabinets full of all types of paper, crayons, books, workbooks, pencils, pens, and other teaching aids, separating the class on the West side. I was curious to peek over to see who was beyond those barriers. I saw a large, equally mixed class being taught by an Asian teacher.

On the left side of the only windows were roughly 3’ by 3’ inch rounded houses painted on hanging paper, with the title “Mystery Mansion.” There were strange people and bird-like beings in the compound, and 15 scary words above the house associated with Hallowe’en. On the right side of the windows hung a bulletin board with “Tom Grattan’s War” written beside three glossy pictures of three people; a man, woman, and a boy - all white. Hanging high above the teacher’s desk, slightly to the right, was a clearly-labeled poster of a guitar and a group of all white boys playing different types of guitars.

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However, the foremost attention grabbers in the room were the posters plastered wall-to-wall, both above, and on both sides of the chalkboard. They were very colourful and glossy pictures of African animals that you might normally find on a game reserve, including elephants, zebras, giraffes, lions, and buffaloes. A poster featuring a Masai man, dressed in colorful burgundy garb, standing on one foot, supported by long reed-like sticks and holding a spear with the other hand, was the centerpiece of all of this. A dagger was clearly visible on the right-hand side of his waist. He seemed to have been posing for a purpose. The animals were organized on the poster with a corresponding letter, from A to Z.

Standing to the right side of the chalkboard, partially covering the view of the classroom to the east of Mrs. Peterson's classroom, was a film screen and a flipchart, standing side by side. Next to them stood a broad and about five foot tall piece of cardboard, partially covered by cutout pictures of animals classified into "Vertebrates" and "Invertebrates." The other half of it was covered by a drawing of Marco Polo's route from Europe to China. An attached handwritten poster explains why Marco Polo was received with skepticism by his fellow Venetians. On the peripheries of the informal portion of the room there were two long tables, side by side, with some books displayed on them. In fact, one of the tables had a display of nine books all entitled "Marco Polo."

All in all, it was an extremely well-furnished and well-equipped classroom. The concluding remarks of my observation on the first day were, "Wow, this makes a high school classroom look like a prison cell."

Shortly after the afternoon shift had started, Mrs. Peterson invited me to take the rocking chair and explain why I was there, and for how long. Almost immediately, the students sat on the floor in front of me in a packed semicircle. At the end of my explanation, I asked them if they had any questions for me. A grade five boy (parents from Jamaica), whom I later found out was named Randy, asked, "If Mrs. Peterson is busy, can we ask you for help if we don't understand what we are supposed to do?" My answer, of course, was yes. Then it was Gus' (parents from Greece) turn, he asked "How many degrees do you have?" That was followed by Bilal (parents from Pakistan) who asked, "Where did you come from originally?" The session came to an abrupt end when the bell for recess rang. I did not know what to make of the fact that all the questions about me came from the boys while the girls remained reserved. I certainly hoped that they would soon approach me with any questions they had.

#### GAINING ACCESS TO THE CLASSROOM

I expected a long and arduous process to gaining entry into a school for the purpose of doing a study of this nature. Soon after the ethical review for the project was approved and filed by my department at the University, I embarked on the process of doing just that. I had identified the particular board of education where I wanted to conduct the study, and three possible schools that might be suitable for it, all in the same general

neighborhood. I had taught a Black Heritage Program during the summer and after school in two of those three schools in previous years, and had developed personal contacts among parents, teachers, principals, vice principals and the community liaison officer for the area. My letter to the head of the research department of the former Board of Education for the City of York requesting access to a classroom was accompanied by another letter from the then chairperson of my thesis committee, Dr. Roger Simon. Coincidentally, the head of the research department had graduated years earlier from OISE, and Dr. Simon had been a member on his thesis committee. Therefore, I had hoped that he would understand my anxiety and give my request favourable consideration. I also knew that the principal of my preferred school was a graduate from OISE. Although I realized that getting access to a school might be a long and difficult process, I hoped that a combination of personal efforts and these connections would lead to a successful outcome.

I submitted my request in January of 1985, and by June that year, the Research Department had given me the go-ahead to do conduct my study in Southview Community School. Southview was my first choice, and a few days later, the principal made me a firm promise that she would try her best to find a teacher who would allow the intrusion of a researcher, hopefully within my choice of grades five or six, or a split level grades five and six class.

On the second Tuesday of October 1985, I arrived at the principal's office as instructed for a meeting with the teacher whose class I was to observe. The principal and I continued chatting in her office while awaiting the host teacher's arrival. She mentioned that it was not easy to find a host teacher willing to accept the possible intrusion into their daily routines.

Finally, she arrived; I was introduced to Mrs. Peterson, my host teacher, who was relieved from teaching for one period so that she could meet with me. Mrs. Peterson was a tall blonde, middle-aged woman. She was very serious, but very welcoming. Shortly after we met in the principal's office, she led me to the staffroom to discuss my expectations.

The beginning of our discussion was a bit awkward, because she started by outlining that the principal had told her the aim of my research was focused on the children and their perception of school. She gave me the impression that since she understood my focus to be only the children (and not their teacher and her practices), she accepted the request from the principal. I started to wonder what else the principal had said to help me get access to a classroom. I started to clarify that this was not entirely true, for the simple reason that one cannot just observe the children without observing how they are taught, and what they are taught. To my relief, Mrs. Peterson agreed – albeit reluctantly.

The discussion went on for about half an hour. Mrs. Peterson did not ask too many questions. The principal seemed to have filled her in with enough information, however incomplete. I felt a bit of a moral dilemma for not being clearer, because the aims and objectives of the study also included observation of the teacher and her classroom practices. However, I did not feel comfortable contradicting the principal

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on that at this point. Instead, I decided to clarify the aims and objectives of my study fully later that day, hoping that I would still maintain Mrs. Peterson's full approval for the study to proceed.

As soon as Mrs. Peterson took me to her classroom, she introduced me to the class by simply saying, "This is Mr. Sium from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and he will remain with us for most of the year." I did not mind the fact that she didn't mention the words "research" or "study." In fact, some of the kids understood my role to mean I was a kind of educational assistant. I thought this was just right for the purpose. In an effort to blend in, I sat at the back of the room but in the middle, with four boys on my left and three on my right, seated at separate desks.

#### ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

I cannot say that I chose Southview Community School for my study for its ethnic and racial diversity, because most schools in the entire City of Metropolitan Toronto could probably boast of having the similarly diverse demographics. There are a significant number of pockets of schools in Toronto that are exclusively white and middle-class. However, I picked Southview Community School for its mix of middle and working-class families - although its diversity was also a welcomed aspect for me. Southview was a medium-sized school of about 350 students, representing about forty languages and the entire ethnic and racial mix for which Toronto is known.

The particular class I was assigned had 30 students: 20 females and 10 males. 14 of them were in grade five and 16 in grade six. The ethnic, racial and gender composition of the class was as follows:

<i>Racial/Ethnic Group</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Sub-Total</i>
Black	5	4	9
British & Irish	2	1	3
Greek	2	1	3
Italian	3	0	3
Chinese	1	1	2
South Asian	1	1	2
South American	2	0	2
Vietnamese	2	0	2
Eastern European	1	2	3
Burmese	1	0	1
Total	20	10	30

In one classroom, not only all major continents, but also most regions of the world were represented. Such a wealth of cultures and traditions were present in one locale.

Observation continued during the following three months, focused on the teaching and learning processes in the classroom, with me taking notes of what went on, and my impressions of events and practices. The notes I took in the classroom

were mostly highlights of what took place. At times, the kids were very curious to read what I had written. Therefore, I used short-hand or coded notes most of the time, in order to minimize the possibility of being a disruption; otherwise it might have been a wonderful idea to get their reaction to my notes. Usually, I went to a café immediately after school and rewrote my notes in detail, while they were fresh in my mind. Soon both Mrs. Peterson and the class felt comfortable enough with my presence. Mrs. Peterson began to expect me to assist when she needed help. For example, she would ask me if I could take a small group of students to the library or to the French room. The kids started to bring their questions to me, and my discussion with them covered both school work and other, wider issues.

The study was completed in four phases. Phase I consisted of six months, participatory classroom observation, including following the class to the playground during recesses, and on out-of-school field trips. I stayed in the selected classroom almost every day, mingling with the students, observing, asking questions and assisting with their work. This made it easier to gain their full trust, which made it more convenient to observe closely, and to ask them questions as well. My almost daily six-month presence in the classroom nicely set the stage for the next phase of the study. During the preliminary process, the children came to understand that I was neither a teacher, nor a teaching assistant. They realized that I was not a staff member, and was not in the business of reporting to the teacher or the principal. Within about a month of my arrival in their classroom, they understood that I was an independent researcher, and that Mrs. Peterson was not privy to know what I did, or to read the notes they saw me taking in the classroom. The kind of communication Mrs. Peterson and I had, and the dynamics of our relationship made all of that obvious to the students.

In Phase II, I selected 16 students out of the 29 in the class, for more focused individual interviews. These I carried out in February and March of 1986 (see Appendix One for interview guide). I selected students to represent the gender, race, and ethnic mix in the classroom, and possibly in the school. I also made an effort to represent regions of the world and patterns of immigration, in order to determine if there were any indications based on time of immigration. The gender ratio among the participants in the interview favoured girls three-to-one over boys. That, however, is not surprising because the ratio of girls to boys in that particular classroom was two-to-one. Both the notes I took and the taped interviews I recorded contain their frank responses to the issues they faced on a daily basis.

Phase III was the last stage in the study, as far as students were concerned. I conducted focus group discussions with the 12 participating students, using selected questions from Appendix One. Like Phase II, Phase III was also taped.

The last stage of research at Southview Community School, Phase IV, was about parents. Seven out of 12 parents who were invited for interviews showed their willingness by signing and returning the permission forms. I interviewed six of them in their homes, while one father preferred to be interviewed in the school. The parent interviews were conducted in May and June of 1986. Three of the seven parents were women, all heads of sole-support parent households. Three

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of the fathers gave the interview, while in one case the mother offered passing remarks while doing household chores. In the other two cases, the mothers offered no comments, they continued doing chores. As far as taping the interviews was concerned, most did not feel comfortable so I stopped asking after a while. I took quick notes with the help of adapted shorthand and codes then I immediately went into seclusion and rewrote the notes, as I had done with my student interview notes and field notes.

I also interviewed the principal, the teacher, and community liaison officer. I asked them about more general matters rather than classroom activities. In fact, I prefer to call my conversations with them a general discussion about the school community and education in general, rather than a formal interview. Since the objectives of the study were to find out what students think of their schooling, I did not question educators on matters of curriculum, teaching and learning.

While conducting the research, I happened to be working with a group of high school students, organizing conferences and workshops on matters of all the isms (mainly racism, sexism, and homophobia). Within this diverse group, there were eight very vocal and articulate black students who worked very hard to sway the larger group to pay more attention to the issue of racism in streaming. I interviewed them individually regarding their impression of how racism is expressed in streaming and the curriculum. I also held a focus group discussion with them on their perceptions of equity. The data I generated from these conversations is relevant to this study, mainly for comparative reasons.

Shortly after this study was completed, I taught “drop-backs” for three years between 1989 and 1993. These were students who had dropped out from high school or elementary school previously, and who were either persuaded by frontline community agencies in downtown Toronto to return to school to further their education, or they chose to return themselves. On any given day, I had a class of between 10 and 16 students, ranging in age from 16 to 24. Part of their healing and refocusing process was to have them talk and write about their experiences in school and at home before they dropped out. These students’ writings, although never compiled for publication, influenced my understanding of student experiences, schooling in Ontario, and the role of parents as student advocates. Thus, while it is not data in the strict sense, it is relevant for this study.

#### WHY A QUALITATIVE STUDY?

Having previously conducted a quantitative study for a Master’s thesis, I became aware of the strengths and weaknesses of both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. A qualitative study, I thought, would be better equipped to give me the desired depth of understanding of the school environment and the thoughts of the children served by it. The extended time required to do an ethnographic study and the close observation techniques that go with it would give me a level of understanding not possible through other methods.

Not only did the study consider that it is important to hear children's voices on the matter of education, but it also valued how they interpreted their experiences and dealt with decisions of the school they did not agree with. An important question was: how do children communicate with their teachers, principal, parents, and their peers about their school experiences, specifically about things they disagree with? How do they show their pleasure or displeasure about what happened in the classroom on a day-to-day basis? What are their coping mechanisms for dealing with situations they dislike, but cannot change? I thought that perhaps a study that employs extended participatory observation and close individual interviews, followed by focus group discussions, would cut through the veil of distrust and internalization of disagreements that often dissuade elementary school children from discussing their dissatisfaction at school with adults.

The issue of Eurocentric versus multicentric (inclusive) curriculum is also an integral part of this study. An ethnographic study can provide a better understanding of the everyday operation of the curriculum, and of teaching and learning activities. In addition, it can allow us to see what those activities convey with respect to cultural identities (McLaren 1997; Goldstein 2002). Hearing the stories of the children and their parents did bring out disagreements with the way education was carried out.

#### ETHICAL AWARENESS

Due to the age of the subjects in the study, I was worried about how I might be perceived. I was particularly concerned about the danger that I could be perceived as an authority figure, rather than a researcher with clear distinction from the classroom teacher or other school board officials. I did not want to be in a situation where participants would tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, rather than what they really wanted to tell me, thereby distorting the results.

I was not a stranger to the education system. Even then, I found out during my first five months as a participant-observer that the extent of the students' and families' vulnerability was even greater than I had thought. I felt that both children and parents were very intimidated by the teacher and other officials, and their fear of authority was real. I started the individual and focus group interviews six months after I joined the classroom. By the time Phase I was over and Phase II was about to begin, the children had a clear sense of what my role was. As a researcher, I tried to create an environment in which the children, teacher and parents would feel comfortable to express themselves freely.

I ensured all the participants that I would maintain confidentiality. To overcome the feeling of vulnerability, I had to remind and reassure both children and parents, again and again, that our conversations were strictly confidential, and that no one but me would have access to the information I collected. On the other hand, the teacher wanted to be informed about what the children and their parents had to say. I promised her that she would be able to read the final draft of the thesis if she wished, and that her responses would be included in the introduction, again if she



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wished. She did not express any desire to do this. I visited her in the classroom after I completed writing the first draft. To my disappointment, I was told she had retired about five to seven years earlier and had moved out of the city.

I was not sure that I earned the full trust of all parents. The turns and twists around the three black parents were interesting. They could not determine my identity throughout our conversation over the telephone. They showed the same hesitations, and offered diplomatic comments like the other parents. Once I knocked at the door, however, it was a different matter, and they felt free to openly express themselves.

My volunteer involvement in various ethno-specific and mainstream community organizations since 1982 to the present put me in a helping situation with numerous parents and their children and also provided research opportunities. That was the off shoot of my MA thesis work, which investigated the extent of involvement of black parents in the education of their children. The use of such data was included in the ethical review for this study. Permission was asked and granted by the parents whose experience is presented in this study.

#### DATA COLLECTION

In all cases, each staff member, parent, and child interviewed spoke from different perspectives and in different voices. They had different views on what was unfolding in the classroom. Students were particularly open in talking about what they liked and disliked about school, especially during focus group interviews. It seemed that they fed on each other's courage to say what they had in mind. Indeed, most of them were very vocal and boisterous. Almost on every question, most of them fought to be the first one to answer.

Likewise, data was collected from the two groups of high school students under the same format. The main focus of the individual as well as the focus group interview was their perception of their schooling and what impact it had on them.

I worried about falling into the pitfalls of a researcher; that I would notice gaps in my data after the research phase was over. One way I thought of avoiding such a situation was to prepare a set of observation/interview guides for each phase.

I also thought that it was important to keep enough connection between the observations I made and interview questions for different participant groups on the same or similar issues. For example, I observed that students did not openly and freely express disagreements with the teacher's decisions in the classroom, even when there was evidence that they did disagree with her. I wanted to ask students during the student interview phase later on how, if at all, they told the teacher of their disagreements. I wanted to know if their disagreements went beyond a very tame body language and non-verbalization. There was plenty of passive resistance from students towards the teacher's decision-making, request of activities, method of marking, etc., and I wanted to follow up on that during the interview phase with the students and parents. I also wondered and wanted to find out from parents if they engaged in more than passive resistance in fighting for their children's rights to equal educational opportunities.



The end result was a pile of participatory observation and interview notes and a stack of interview tapes. It took the next twenty years to get the notes and tapes out of the boxes and start analyzing the data. I had to drop everything and go back to full-time teaching to look after my family first. In the summer of 2008, it occurred to me finally that the work and family responsibilities that had forced me to abandon my graduate work were settled, and I could resume academic work again.

However, at this late stage, I found the thought of analyzing data collected two decades earlier to be nerve-racking, to say the least. Questions like, would the data be detailed enough to jog my memory? Would the study and its findings be relevant to the current issues in our educational system? Would OISE allow me to go ahead and complete analyzing the study? Would I be able to get a willing supervisor and a new committee to oversee my work? Fortunately the answer to each of my questions was yes.

It so happened that I kept detailed field notes, which captured the dynamics and flavour of the class, both inside and outside the classroom. Both my taped and scripted interviews contained the details of the circumstances and contexts surrounding the nature of the interactions I had witnessed. Adding to my ease, everything pointed me towards completing the project.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected showed that the research site had multiple voices coexisting within it. Perhaps Richard Quantz and Terence O'Connor describe the research site better:

In researching and writing ethnography, one must describe the dynamic and conflictual nature of marginalized cultures, record the dialogues that bind the individual into a private world and a social community, and reveal the many voices struggling for expression. Realizing this, the ethnographer must not construct a single set of patterns from single-minded individuals, but must present a range of legitimated and nonlegitimated voices found in the community. (Quantz and O'Connor 1988: 104)

Further, Quantz and O'Connor postulate that disempowered groups are in dialogue both externally and internally, i.e. they are in dialogue among themselves and with social elites (Quantz and O'Connor 1988: 105).

My data analysis approach was guided by the above described realities. The purpose of my research project was not just to describe the research site, but rather to explore and identify the transformative elements within it. That in turn served as a guide to develop a strategy by which the data could be sorted out, sequenced and analyzed.

First of all, I want find out how the learning material was picked and who were the major players in that process. The next part of that was what form did teaching

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and learning take and who were the competing voices in it, if any. The result was chapters four and five.

The second major layer of my data analysis was to examine the interaction between the school and parents. How were parents being informed about their children's learning needs and how those needs could be met? Who were the parents who were being taken seriously or not?

Chapter seven on the other hand was given the task of examining the task of the concept of "public education" and whether or not it lived to its common perception as a server of all children equally and as an equalizer of opportunities. Data collected over the decades since my study was done was used to corroborate and show a trend of systemic discrimination. The result was chapter eight.

The last step in my data analysis was to present the overall findings of the data collected. It was also to reflect whether or not race, gender and class were factors in the way the school interacted and dealt with students and parents. The overall purpose of the whole exercise of course was to point out what transformative course of actions towards building inclusive education the data suggested and what the possibilities of implementing them would be.

**PART II**  
**DATA ANALYSIS**

## CHAPTER 4

### FOCUS ON THE CURRICULUM

In keeping with how most ethnographic studies proceed, I decided to start mine with an extended period of observation. I trailed the class wherever it went, into both formal and informal (the gym and the playground during recess time) settings. My objectives were to understand the nature, as well as the format, of teaching and learning, and the processes by which these were achieved. I also wanted to find out the level of student engagement and participation in the teaching and learning process. This chapter presents the bulk of my observations.

The first day of observation was almost over before I realized the order of subjects taught on a daily basis. I compared the order of activities that day with what was written on two columns on white cards and plastered on the right end of the chalkboard:

Writing	Math
Spelling	Science
Language	Social Studies
Creative Writing	Gym
Reading	Music
French	Homework
Art	

It became obvious that this was the timetable of the day. The listing served as a general guide for the cycle of daily activities, including subjects like French, art and music. I soon found out that some subjects were skipped from time to time. For example, there were some days when the class did not do any reading, science or social studies, and sometimes the order of subjects was reversed. I was acutely interested to find out the subjects that were taught, as well as the duration for which and sequence in which they were taught. I took this as an indicator of priorities and therefore what is considered important or less important by the school. That in turn could open a window, I thought, to the whole notion of inclusivity or lack of it. The turn of events in a given day was as follows:

#### ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE CLASSROOM

Monday, October 28, 1985  
(File: FINO05, pp. 26-32)

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9:00 am – Opening exercises: Everyone stood in the formal setting of the classroom, with the teacher right in front of them by her desk for the national anthem before the prayer of the day was read by a student. The principal came on to the P.A. system to thank everyone who had participated in the costume display festival. In closing, the vice-principal came on to announce and remind the school to prepare for the trip to the Royal Agricultural Fair, which would take place at Exhibition Place.

9:09 – Mrs. Peterson led the class to the informal part of the room and sat on the rocking chair. All students followed her and sat on the carpet in front of her. Donovan and Daniel (both black) tried to drag along a nearby bench to sit on. One piercing sharp look from Mrs. Peterson told them it was not okay. They immediately abandoned their plan and joined the rest of the class on the floor. It was “News Time.” A number of hands went up to tell their news of the day. Helen (black) seemingly couldn’t wait for Mrs. Peterson’s recognition and burst out with her story. No one seemed to contribute as much as Helen when it comes to news time. She talked about Larry Grossman’s win for the leadership of the Tory Party of Ontario. She had several Toronto Star clippings in her hands, documenting that event and other stories. No one takes news time as seriously Helen does. Bilal (of Pakistani background) added it was a very narrow victory over Denis Timbrell. Susan (mother English and father Scottish) brought to their attention the eruption of a volcano in Indonesia and the loss of some life there. Randy (black) was not paying any attention, quietly playing with his fingers. Mrs. Peterson asked him if he had any news. He answered that he didn’t. She reminded him to bring a news item for the next day. Then the boys took over. It was all about hockey after that. Gus mentioned that the Leafs had won for the second time in a row, and a few of the other boys added their comments. Then it was a discussion of the Quebec Nordiques’ successes, spearheaded by Phillip (his roots go to Germany, Britain and Ireland).

9:24 – Mrs. Peterson headed for her desk, signaling the end of news time. Students followed suit, heading to their desks, back to the formal half of the room. No time was lost in the transition and I was impressed by how quietly they made the transition. Mrs. Peterson picked up a book to read from as she remained seated on her desk. As she prepared to start reading, Helen put up her hand and requested to read instead. Reluctantly, Mrs. Peterson agreed. I understood why she may want to read herself, to provide role modeling on how to read. I had heard that she read many times prior to that. Helen was almost equally good. Her intonations and her pauses for punctuation were flawless. She read smoothly and confidently. My field notes summarized the content of the few paragraphs she read as follows:

Strange looking, brown-skinned dwarfs invaded Northern Britain. Those little brown beings were so evil that the people of Britain had to fight hard to get rid of them. That happened shortly after the Roman occupiers left.

This particular reading was from *Witches, Pumpkins, and Grinning Ghosts: The Story of the Hallowe’en Symbol* by Edna Barth, published by Clarion Books, New York.

Mrs. Peterson signaled to Helen the end of reading, pulled the flip chart in front of the class and instructed the grade sixes to write what was on the board first and then use them in writing a story of their own. The list on the flip chart was as follows:

A stooped, ragged shadow, flying on a broomstick, smoke entwined, evil, wicked, detestable, desiring a herd of ghouls to roundup, all the fat children in the land, juicy morsels for a delectable dinner, seeking satisfaction, frustration, oozing from her pores, impending doom!

As soon as the grade sixes got down to the task of writing the story, Mrs. Peterson called the grade fives. They got back marked writing assignments done the day before. Mrs. Peterson was in the middle of giving the grade fives their next writing assignment about Hallowe'en when Paul (a white student, grade six) walked over to Gus (a Greek student) for some reason, all the while glancing at Mrs. Peterson. She looked at him with a pause, and he returned immediately to his seat.

9:45 – Grade sixes line up to go to French class. The French teacher came and led them away, and they stayed with her until recess time. The grade fives continued working on their writing. As soon as the grade sixes were gone, the principal arrived to relieve Mrs. Peterson for a smoke break. Mrs. Peterson asked me if I wanted to join her in the staffroom, where she stayed for coffee breaks. The last time I had gone along with her, the smoke bothered my eyes, so I indicated that I would stay in the classroom. Halfway through Mrs. Peterson's break, the vice-principal came in to take over supervision from the principal. It was at that time that I was first introduced to her. The principal also mentioned to the vice-principal the nature of my research. "I will be interested to know what you will find," the VP said to me. I have heard that statement so often from staff. I noticed that during the entire time Mrs. Peterson was on a break, everyone was working quietly except Randy, Daniel and Akil (all African-Canadian students). They were constantly moving around, but quietly so. From time to time, both administrators reminded everyone to work quietly. It seemed to me that all three boys knew that as long as they were not loud, they could move around when Mrs. Peterson was not in the classroom. Randy sat very close to me, so I leaned over to see if he had started his writing. He had not. Mrs. Peterson came back just before recess started.

#### 10:30 – Recess

I was interested to find out how the students socialized or not when outside of the classroom. So I located almost the entire class during the entire recess. The groupings in which I found them were as follows.

Group One: Donovan, Dan, Gus, Bilal, and some other boys from the other grade six class were playing touch ball. This was a very racially mixed, all-boys group.

Group Two: Adrianna, Carla, Maria, and other girls from other classes. This was also a racially mixed group, this time composed of all girls, who were also playing the touch ball game.

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Group Three: Theodora, Luigia, Yasmina, Kate, and Sonya an ethnically mixed group – though all Caucasian (Southern as well as Northern European origins) – were just chatting.

Group Four: Paul joined three other boys, one black and two Caucasians. Together, they roamed around the playground for the entire recess. I thought that their instincts had driven them to do so after sitting in class for that long.

Group Five: Helen was playing touch game with non-class members, multi-racial group.

Group Six: For this group of three black boys, consisting of Randy, Akil, and Daniel, recess was the best time – as they made it repeatedly clear to me – because it is really their time, and they could do whatever they wanted. They joined other grade five black boys, and they played spies, as usual.

Group Seven: Trisha (a black student) as usual, used her recess free time to help out in the daycare. This is part of her strategy to impress her teachers by engaging in serious matters. Susan, Nhie (a Vietnamese student) and Amy (Chinese) had been gone for the whole morning session to another school for an enrichment program in language arts (English). When they were around, the last three joined the junior kindergartens with whom they volunteered not just during recess, but also during a lot of other free time they had, including after school. Susan, on the other hand, usually played with Helen and the other girls during recess.

10:55 – Formally, recess should have ended at 10:45 a.m., but by the time everything settles and class restarts, it is almost 11:00. Both grades six and five took turns going to the rocking chair to take a dictation of a list of words from a Language Arts workbook, from Mrs. Peterson. I noticed that Trisha and Yasmina took the grade five dictation, although they were in grade six. Following the dictation, both grades were instructed to pick up the same language arts workbook to find out how they had done and to correct any mistakes. Again, I noticed Trisha and Yasmina picking up the grade five math work book to check their work.

11:30 – Both grades took turns sitting in front of the rocking chair. Mrs. Peterson dictated their spelling tests of 25 words each. Again, Trisha and Yasmina took the grade five spelling test. Each time Mrs. Peterson collected the tests for marking. As the groups took turns taking their spelling tests, the group not being tested continued to correct their dictation assignments. I noticed Paul struggling to maintain his focus during the spelling test. This morning, Mrs. Peterson had told him that she would speak to his father that night about his lack of focus on his work, and that shook him up at least for the rest of the day.

11:40 – The grade sixes were instructed to pick up their math books and follow Mrs. Peterson to the rocking chair to get their assignment of the day. The grade fives followed suit, and immediately started to measure in centimeters desks, the flip chart, the film screen and other items. That was their math assignment. Both grades continued working until lunch break.

12:00 – Bell rang for lunch break

1:20 pm – This was the time class resumed in the afternoon. As usual Mrs. Peterson marked her attendance list, and it was a full house. The principal came on the PA system and said, “I wonder why many of you arrived at school very early, only to stay outside in the rain and get wet. You could have arrived at 1:10 pm and stayed inside the school and avoided getting wet.” Then she invited anyone who would like to participate in the “National Costume Festival” to see her immediately. After the announcements on the PA system were finished, both classes were reminded by Mrs. Peterson to pick up their math books again, and to resume completing the assignment they had started just before lunch. A few minutes later, Mrs. Peterson called the grade fives and handed them a math test handout, at the same time reminding them that they will have a test on Marco Polo’s travels the following week.

1:50 – It was gym time. Mrs. Peterson asked me if I could stay and supervise Daniel, Trisha, Randy and Theodora finishing their tests, and she handed me the folder where the rest of the tests were kept. Theodora finished before the rest of the class left, so she joined them. Soon after the class left, Randy finished, and then Trisha, so they too followed the class. Daniel stayed until 2:00, and still did not finish the test. However, the reading specialist teacher arrived to pick him up for extra help, and he was gone with her before he finished his assignment. So I placed his incomplete test with the rest. They usually get their marked tests back the next day. That means Mrs. Peterson had both the English and math tests to mark either tonight or early tomorrow morning. She mentioned to me earlier that she usually arrived at school early in the morning to mark.

I arrived in the gym to absolute excitement. The class had divided itself into two teams; one led by Phillip the other by Bilal. I saw that T was not playing any role; the students were in charge. It was a volleyball game. Everyone who completed serving joined the bench and another joined the team. Thanks to good serves by Trisha, Anna, Amy, and Adrienne, Phillip’s team won the game.

2:45 – Back to the classroom, and this time Daniel was back. The grade sixes were handed their large project on the Soviet Union that they had started before. They were in the process of gathering some basic information about the Soviet Union, its geography, politics, and population. In a world dominated by two superpowers, the Soviet Union was presented as the more aggressive one in the project. The other superpower, the United States, was presented as a peacemaker. The grade fives were given a list of Chinese characters with matching translations and asked to construct sentences using them. It was an assignment they had started before.

3:20 – The grade fives were instructed to work and complete their world map assignment, which they started before, while the grade sixes continued working on their assignment on the Soviet Union.



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3:40 – The bell rang, signaling the end of the school day. However, those who were not able to complete any assignment that they were supposed to have been finished that day were expected to continue completion of such work until 4:00 pm. In fact, Mrs. Peterson asked Randy, Daniel and Ellen if she had approved their spelling corrections. Everyone but Amy, Phuong, Nhie, and Michelle stayed, and continued working. The rest left as soon as they could, including Daniel, Randy and Akil, whom I knew had not completed English and math assignments, and who knows what else. I informed Mrs. Peterson that Daniel took his test home with him. “Yes, he does that often, because he gets his sister to do it for him,” she responds.

#### TREATMENT OF THE CRITICAL ISSUES OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN THE CURRICULUM

Learning English was a big part of the daily activities, as shown by the above single-day entry from my field notes. Almost half of the total class time was spent on reading, writing, spelling and rewriting the corrections made on the students’ work. The last half hour to forty-five minutes of each day was also slotted for homework completion, and a significant part of that was one form of language arts or another. Other than English, math and gym, no subjects were taught on daily basis, including social sciences. Even then, gym had been made a daily event only in the most recent overhaul of the Ontario curriculum, after health professionals made persistent pitches to the government.

As both Goodlad (1984) and Cullingford (1991) have observed in their earlier studies, the lion’s share of the time in this classroom was also spent on English and math, however, English was allotted double the time compared to math. Social studies and science were short-changed. Visual arts, music, drama, and dance did even worse. In fact, dance was not offered at all.

The day always started with “News Time,” which usually took five to ten minutes. Depending on how you look at it, news time could be considered a social science, if only the causes and implications of events were discussed as well.

News time was typically followed by reading, and then writing, in turn followed by spelling. On October 29, 1985, the order of activities followed the same routine. Following “News Time” Mrs. Peterson picked up a book on Hallowe’en and read about four pages from it. My field notes on the content summarized it as follows:

The reading explained how the tradition of Hallowe’en started about the time the Romans conquered England, Scotland and Ireland. The idea of spirits and ghosts reappearing at times, in different shapes and forms was borrowed from the Romans. The term “Hallowe’en” came from the phrase “All Hallows.”  
(File: FINO05, p. 11)

As she closed the book, the teacher reminded the class that she would continue reading from the same book the next day.

From October 15, 1985, the day I joined the class, to Friday, November 1, 1985, all reading and writing class activities, assignments, and at times, even spelling was based on remembering, understanding as a cultural practice, and recreating Hallowe'en. Hallowe'en-based activities were nothing new to Canadian-born students, or to those who had come to Canada at a younger age. They had been sufficiently exposed to it through "trick or treat" neighbourhood tours, media coverage, and prior classroom activities. However, more recent immigrants like Trisha, Sonya, Shrika, and Yasmina, who had all arrived in Canada within the last 12 months, were struggling to cope with all of this new information. Understanding the concept of Hallowe'en meant that first they had to learn what the rest of the class had learned about Hallowe'en in previous years, and then stride along with the new material. They were clearly at a disadvantage. The reading, writing, and spelling activities connected with Hallowe'en exposed them to a lot more new words than their previously exposed peers. Potentially, that could have been a good thing. However, there was no follow-up to help reinforce their new learning, and assistance was not provided to help them integrate the world of Hallowe'en into their daily language use.

I leaned over to check on how Trisha had done on her Hallowe'en-based spelling test soon after the tests were returned by Mrs. Peterson. Trisha's test had quite a few mistakes, including the word "Hallowe'en." She spelled it "halloween" and this was marked X (wrong) for not capitalizing it. This was a girl who listed spelling as her favourite subject, both in Canada and in Jamaica. I wanted to know how she thought she had done, and how she may have interpreted or rationalized her performance:

"How did you do?" I asked. She quietly pushed her paper towards me, in a somber mood.

"I don't know why I made so many mistakes," she said a few seconds later, clearly blaming herself.

"Have you heard about these words before," I continued my probe.

"Yes, Mrs. Peterson read them to us. I also remember reading them in the books we have on Hallowe'en in class," she said.

"But have you ever heard about these words before this fall?"

"No."

Trisha seemed dumbfounded as to why she had done poorly, compared to Helen, who was born in Toronto to a middle-class black family (her father is a teacher). Helen, who sat in front of Trisha, had got perfect, and was nonchalant about it, as if she expected nothing less. One could see why Trisha took it hard and blamed herself for her disappointing result, for the simple reason that first, she was judged harshly by the teacher, and secondly, no rationale was given to her as to why she had performed less well than she had expected of herself. It was never explained to her that she was not expected to spell all the words right for the simple reason that she needed a lot more time to catch up to the rest of the class. Trisha was not getting special support or focused help to acclimatize her to the Canadian school system. The school did not seem to take responsibility for her poor performance that day.

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Instead, she was forced to take full responsibility for her spelling mistakes. What transpired around Trisha with that spelling test was most likely similar to the rest of the new Canadian students. It was certainly true as far as exposure to the Hallowe'en related words was concerned.

Underachievement in general terms, however, was not limited to new Canadian students from a Third World country. I noticed that Daniel was working on his spelling from "*2 Spelling in Language Arts*," a book designed for grade two students. I asked him, "How come you are working from a book for grade two?" His answer was, "You see, what we learned in England was different" (File: FINO05, P. 30). While this may have been true for Daniel, two other boys, Randy and Akil – who were born and bred in Toronto, and therefore fully the products of our school system – did not do any better than Daniel did. I had noticed that all three of them worked from a math textbook for grade four. Most of the time, it was desk work from a textbook for all those who were performing below grade level. That meant they were not getting regular lessons like the rest of their grade five and six peers, something that would be particularly problematic when the class moved onto a new unit.

As Hallowe'en season wound down, I wondered what would replace the materials for reading, writing and spelling. Beginning on the first school day after Hallowe'en, materials about both world wars and Remembrance Day commemoration preparations became the subject of most classroom activities, including in art, music and social science. Almost every activity, with the exception of math and science, came under the umbrella of "The Great Wars," World War I and II. The wars became the subject of reading, writing, spelling exercises, art, and musical activities almost until the end of November.

After a brief interlude between major national events, which lasted a week, Christmas material poured into the classroom in all language and music lessons. There was a steady movement from Hallowe'en to remembering world wars, and now to Christmas. During that interlude week, non-national event-related books like, *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* were used for reading.

Like most books used in the classroom and in the school library, *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* was published in New York by Dell Publishing Co. Ltd. Mrs. Peterson shared with me the list from which she and the school librarians ordered their books, sent by a book-promoting company based in Richmond Hill, Ontario. The four-page blurb listed 85 titles; only three of them were written and published in Canada. The front cover of many of the books was included in the blurb, and one could see either mysterious animals, like the Unicorn in *The Escape of the Unicorn* or The Elf in *Santa Claus Storybook*. About half of the book covers had actual humans on them and they were all white (File: FINO05, p. 44). There is no sign that a member of any racialized group was involved in writing or publishing those books.

As a teacher, I am appreciative of the fact that the Ontario Ministry Curriculum Guidelines are broad enough to allow me maximum flexibility to spice up my courses or even change their focus from Eurocentric to multicentric. However, the availability of curriculum material has always been a seriously limiting factor, and

this situation was much worse in the 1980s. Willing teachers have had to work very hard to make their teaching materials, books videos, etc. more inclusive. However, technology and the internet have made it much easier today to get more inclusive curriculum material. One question that I grappled with was how Mrs. Peterson made her choices of teaching material. Was it systemic, in that the system didn't make inclusive teaching materials available to teachers? Or was it due to the fact that she did not make enough effort to make the teaching material more inclusive? I did not raise the issue with her again because, for one thing, she did not open any door for me to discuss it, for example by asking a question or making any comment about any of the teaching material. She always appeared she knew what she was doing. Besides, I had tried to raise issues with teaching material before, but I was politely discouraged from doing so.

On Wednesday, November 27, 1985, there was a lot of in and out movement in the classroom. A few of the students had to go for various enrichment programs and others had volunteered to participate in school-wide events. Therefore, Mrs. Peterson decided that it was time for a common activity for both grades. The lesson was provided by a video, entitled "The Viola," from the school library's collection.

The video outlined the history of the viola and its origins, in Europe. It then zeroed in on an individual who kept the art of viola-making alive.

Otto Erdesz was a Jewish refugee from Hungary, who moved to New York during the Hungarian uprising in the early 1950s. After some years in New York, first he moved to Israel and then to Toronto, where he made his final home. During his movement from one country to another, he continued crafting some of the most coveted violas around. A renowned viola player, 30 years his junior, tried out his make of viola and after a brief hesitation, she came to love it. She later became his wife. The story also included how he used to import wood from Europe before he discovered Canadian wood was better. (File: FINO05, p. 72)

As I watched the video described, I remembered watching another music lesson with the class in the previous week through a video that was more inclusive in its content. The title was, "The history of guitar." The video started with a delightful flamenco dance accompanied by Spanish guitar. Then the narrator took over and said:

The history of the guitar can be traced back to the Arabs, who brought it with them first to Egypt, then to North Africa, and ultimately to Spain as they spread Islam at the same time. It was in Spain that the guitar took its current shape. That was why it was given the name "Spanish Guitar." Otherwise, the guitar had been in use in Turkey, India, China, Russia, Congo, Italy, and France. They all used one form of guitar or another, but it was the Spanish guitar which came to dominate the world. (File: FINO05, p. 8-9)

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One wonders about the truth in this story line. Does the Spanish guitar really dominate the world of music making? Has not the guitar been perfected concurrently in many parts of the world for various types of music styles? In Africa alone, there are hundreds of types of guitars. Again, students are at risk of being left with the impression that nothing gets perfected until it gets its last touches in Europe. The whole presentation falls into the trap of breaking down the beginnings of things to a single origin. In these videos, there was no recognition that most often there are multiple origins to things. There is nothing more inclusive than giving credit to all innovators.

However, the most glaring omission could have been the opportunity missed for some inclusive lesson by talking about the perfection of the guitar in the students' own continent, North America, by contemporary musicians, from blues to rock to jazz. Instead the question the class had to answer was, "who is the most famous classical guitarist Canadian" (File: FINO05, p. 9)? That question effectively thwarted the discussion away from inclusive instruction or discussion.

There were many moments in the classroom when generalizations and misrepresentations, particularly in relation to race and gender were made. Whether or not they were dealt with to the satisfaction of the learner became the subject of observation.

On Monday, November 4, 1985, a movie from the "Tom Grattan's War Series" was shown to the whole class. The title of the series was "The Hero." My field notes summary reads as follows:

The story was about a handsome war hero, who came back from the war limping. The war was not over yet. Tom became jealous of the hero and ran away from home to join the army, along with many other young men. Tom was rejected by the army for enlistment, and on his way home acts like a hero by saving a group of horses from a burning barn and earns admiration from the owner, an old lady, and other observers. Dad, mom and his little sister also gave him a hero's welcome upon returning home. (File: FINO05, 31)

As soon as the movie ended, the commentator from TV Ontario took centre stage. She identified some problematic issues with the message of the movie:

Why did they (the movie producers) choose a handsome young man? Why did they show troops enjoying life instead of dead bodies in the trenches, starving women and children, or terrorized and running women and children? Do you think Tom would have attempted to join the army to go to war had they shown terror? I doubt it. That is how film producers misled our perception of the war. (File: FINO05, P. 32)

It was clear that the TVO commentator expected some kind of class discussion after the episode was shown, and that she was trying to lead its viewers towards a critical assessment of the episode by posing a few critical questions. However,

Mrs. Peterson handed out a list of other questions prepared by the producers of the series, specifically on that particular episode. The list contained six questions. Mrs. Peterson instructed the class to answer only question number six, which asked, “Do you have a hero in your life? Who is it?” Both grades five and six were given some time to answer the question. The clear misrepresentation that the series producers made went unchallenged. The main lesson intended by TVO, as presented by the young woman commentator, was totally ignored.

A few days earlier, when the Hallowe’en season was still underway, a movie was shown in which a white family was being terrorized, running from room to room. At some point the 17 year-old sister turned to her 14 year-old brother and told him, “I am scared.” Unmistakably, her body language said “protect me.”

Again, the TVO commentator’s verdict on that episode was swift. She said, “The movie is very sexist and against women. I am glad I didn’t live 60 years ago” (File: FINO05, p. 12). Following the showing of the episode, Mrs. Peterson wrote a question on the chalkboard for the class to answer: “List all the things we have today that those people (in the movie) did not have.” The issue of gender was not included in the follow-up exercise.

On another occasion, part of the lesson was to define “prejudice” and give an example, with students working individually to produce a definition. All grade six students were asked to pick up their dictionaries from the shelves. Later, after the work was finished (at least most of them had finished), Mrs. Peterson asked Susan to define prejudice. Susan promptly read the answer aloud. Then Kate was asked to give an example, which she answered as follows:

My best friend is black. My friend was pushed with hatred many times by a bully. The bully was a Jewish boy in our neighborhood. I found out that Jewish people are also prejudiced against black people. (File: FINO05, p. 28)

Mrs. Peterson continued taking more definitions and examples from other students, without initiating a follow-up discussion on Kate’s statement. Kate, who was herself white, may have had the best of intentions. She did not mean to clarify an erroneous generalization by another erroneous generalization. It seemed to me that she had inadvertently opened a door for more teachable moments on prejudice. The idea that one person does not represent a whole race or ethnic group could have been developed into some careful thinking, either through class discussion, or by some other means of collaborative learning.

Class bias, laced with race and gender biases, wrapped up in a Eurocentric world outlook, was also quite prevalent in classroom discussions. What were considered to be normal class activities by the teacher routinely exposed the lack of inclusiveness in the curriculum.

For example, Mrs. Peterson prepared a book talk on January 15, 1986. The class was invited to sit on the carpet in a rarely used corner of the classroom. Mrs. Peterson stood in front of the class behind a long table, covered with books. Behind

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Mrs. Peterson hung a poster containing the definition of two terms, “Biography” and “Autobiography.” My field notes identified the books as follows:

The biography titles consisted of five males sports celebrities, including Gordie Howe and Bobby Hall; three American presidents, including Abraham Lincoln; two Canadian prime ministers, Sir John A. McDonald and Mackenzie King; Houdini; two British kings and two queens (File: FINO05/06, p. 115). There was not even a token representation when it came to race, class or gender. The reason for this could not have been lack of books on ordinary people from all races, classes and genders. At least there was no shortage at the time of biographies on women and or of biographies of famous individuals from non-dominant cultural, economic and ethnic groups. For example, it could have been very timely to include the biography of Dave Winfield, of the Toronto Blue Jays’ slugger, since the team was very popular in those days, and he played a big role in the team’s success.

Mrs. Peterson briefly introduced each book on the table and asked if there were questions. Helen asked why they were all biographies and not a single one of them was an autobiography, picking up on the title of the presentation, *biographies and autobiographies*. The answer from Mrs. Peterson was:

It is extremely difficult to get autobiographies, because it is extremely difficult for important people to take the time and write about themselves. Besides, there are plenty of other people willing to write about them. (File: NINO05/06, p. 116)

At that point, Donovan creeps closer to the table and attempts to pick up the book on Abraham Lincoln. Mrs. Peterson reminds him quickly that these books are not for distribution. She instructs the class to go to the library right then and pick up a biography or autobiography, read it, and get ready for a presentation by January 29, 1986. Maria turns her face away from the teacher towards Carla, makes faces and says ‘boring.’

Social studies as a subject offer great opportunities for inclusive programming. It should have been at the forefront, along with reading and writing, to be used as a tool to offer maximum opportunities for diversifying the curriculum. However, this study has found that social studies was a low priority with the daily activities, just as Goodlad and Cullingford found to be the case in the British and the U.S. school systems. Our educational system is very similar to the school systems described by Goodlad (1984) and Cullingford (1991) in Chapter Two. Social studies as a subject had been given very low profile; it is not taught on a daily basis like math and English. On top of that, its potential as an equalizer could not be realized since it was taught in class from a Eurocentric point of view.

‘Exploration and explorers’ was a very high profile topic in social studies among grade fives and sixes. The travels and exploits of Marco Polo, Vasco da Gama,



Vespuchi, and Christopher Columbus proved to be unforgettable lessons for all members of the class, regardless of their background. The travels of Marco Polo turned out to be the most popular. Students found the travelers' confrontation with various diverse and worldly peoples and their unique traditions very captivating.

The driving force behind their motivation to take the risk of traveling to distant, and at times, dangerous lands, was presented as just curiosity and a strong desire to see the world. Usually, students took what they learned at face value and did not raise questions as to why these men took the risk of placing themselves within the dangers of the unknown. Asked about why they went on exploration expeditions, here is Shrika's answer:

I have never heard about these people, like Marco Polo and Christopher Columbus before, because what I studied in St. Vincent was about Africa and America. I think they traveled because they wanted to find new places and meet people they never seen before. (File: STIN06, p. 2)

Just as she mentioned Africa and America, I asked Shrika if she learned anything about Africa or black people in Canada.

The only time I learned about black people was in black heritage. I learned about Harriet Tubman, Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King. I also heard about Africa when Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa to go to India, but I did not learn about the people of Africa. (File: STIN06)

I thought that was a very perceptive commentary on her part, given that none of the real motives of the explorers was raised in class. The explanation was that they went to explore the world for adventure. None of the economic motives and the racist assumptions of the travelers were explored. Not surprising, it seemed that most of the students took the intentions of the explorers at face value, as they were presented to them. This and similar Hollywood-influenced portrayals of European exploration were shared by most in the class.

However, there were some dissenting voices; Gus thought that there were benefits to be claimed. He elaborated that: "all the new places they discovered had new things in them. By being the first ones to be there, they benefited their countries by taking the new things." (File: STIN06, p. 11) Gus did not know what the explorers and the countries they represented took or how they acquired them, but he knew they took "things". On top of being very affable, popular and well-mannered, Gus was very thoughtful and perceptive. It should also be pointed out that being well-mannered was not unique to Gus, because each member of the class was too. In a way that was ironic, because he was also one of the least ambitious students in that class, who tried to get by with minimum effort in completing his school work.

During my individual interviews with Donovan, the issue of the European explorers was also raised. Gus and Donovan were able to go beyond what was



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covered in the curriculum to provide their own insights about the motives of the explorers. Here is what Donovan said:

First they just wanted to know how to get to the different places they went to and know the people who lived there. Then they wanted to control those countries for themselves and that is how cowboys and Indians started. There was a lot of fighting. (File: STIN06, p. 17)

As noted above, Gus also thought that “All the new places they discovered had new things in them”. That is, things the explorers wanted to extract to “benefit their countries.” I thought that these were quite sophisticated comments from 11 year-olds, given that there was no mention of the real motives of the explorers during the learning activities. I could not hide my surprise when Donovan connected the episodes of “cowboys and Indians” to those who opened up the colonial frontiers. Therefore, clearly at least some students were able to connect the dots and reject the official version of why the explorers went about “finding” new places and claiming them for their kings and queens.

Understandably, some students expressed their disappointment with lack of diversity in the teaching material. In fact, one wonders what happened to the most prominent poster in the room, a colourful Masai man standing on one leg, and the big African wild animals in the background. Here was my first impression of them described in Chapter Three, “However, the foremost attention grabber in the room was the posters plastered wall to wall both above and on both sides of the chalkboard. They were very colourful and glossy pictures of African animals that you normally find in a game reserve, like elephants, zebras, giraffes, lions, buffaloes, etc. with a Masai man, in colourful burgundy garb, standing on one foot, supported by long reed sticks and holding a spear with the other hand, in the middle of it all. The animals were organized on the poster with a corresponding letter, from A to Z.” I was under the impression that at some point during the year, they would provide material for learning.

Despite the fact that the largest racial group in the school as a whole – as well as in Mrs. Peterson’s classroom – was African-Canadians, there was not even a mention of anything that had originated in Africa or the African diaspora during the whole year. The children in the classroom did not get any indication that Africans, living throughout the world, have contributed anything worth knowing to the world.

#### INDOCTRINATION THROUGH RITUALISTIC EPISODES

On Monday, November 11, 1985, at the top of Mrs. Peterson’s to-do list was to stage an excellent Remembrance Day memorial service. Using the PA system, the principal made a call to all classes to come to the gymnasium, which also serves as the auditorium, at 9:10 for the memorial service. All classes filed into the neatly arranged rows of chairs and clean hall. The usual festive decorations were missing, with the exception of bouquets of roses on and around the stage.

The emcee, a grade six girl from Mrs. Murabayashi's class, asked the audience to rise up. Then, two war veterans, one hoisting the Canadian flag, followed by the principal, the vice-principal and the chairperson of the parent's council marched from the back of the gym to the stage. As everyone remained standing, the Canadian national anthem was played. Then two black girls, from Mrs. Murabayashi's grade six class, laid a wreath of flowers on the stage.

A racially diverse team of girls was called to the stage to sing and to recite poems. Mrs. Murabayashi and the other teacher, who always took turns to play the piano, did the same. Prior to that date, one student from each class was nominated by the classroom teacher "as the most eligible to be named as the peacemaker of the year" and they were recognized following the songs and poems in memory of the war. Helen was the nominee from Mrs. Peterson's class.

The emcee made a few insightful remarks, and then called upon the principal to welcome the participants and the WW II veterans, at the same time introducing the speaker of the day, one of the veterans. My field notes summarized the principal's remarks as follows:

Canada dedicated all its material and human resources to ensure winning both wars. Veterans like ... (named both veterans on the stage) fought and sacrificed their lives so that we could continue to enjoy our freedom. Those who paid the ultimate price, died for us and for the freedom we enjoy today. (File: FINO05, p. 33)

The veteran who rose to speak wore a green army uniform, including a hat, with three medals on his chest. A summary of his remarks read as follows:

The war had been in progress for quite some time when I enlisted in the army, just before completing my high school diploma. In those days you couldn't open the daily newspapers or your radio without noticing the repeated calls to defend Canada against the Nazis, so I enlisted voluntarily to defend my country. When I think about it, war is not something you wish to see happen. No one wants to see all the friends you made in the army get (here the veteran got choked up and was fighting back tears) killed in front of your eyes .... (File: FINO05, p. 34)

Yet again, the veteran successfully resisted following in the footsteps of the principal in glorifying the war. I have been teaching for the last 29 years, and I have attended that many Remembrance Day memorials. I have never heard a war veteran speaker speak of the wars being fought for "our freedom and democracy." In fact, one war veteran that I heard a few years back quoted an ancient Greek historian, Herodotus, who had said, "No one wins war. Therefore leaders must do their best to avoid waging war." His concluding remark was a total anticlimax to what had been building up as boastful event. By contrast, principals who gave introductory remarks and introduced the war veterans to the stage invariably glorified the wars, just like this Remembrance Day gathering.

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By and large, this particular Remembrance Day memorial, like most other memorial events I attended, left students with a couple of impressions. First, that Canada played a decisive role in winning the war against the Nazis, along with its only two allies, Britain and the U.S. None of the contributions of other European countries, including the Soviet Union - which did most of the Nazi-smashing - got a mention. Second, students were left with the impression that these wars were fought only by white men against another set of white men. None of the Asians, Africans and racial minorities from North America, including aboriginal Canadian veterans, made it in front of the camera on films that were screened during the memorial. The crucial contributions of racial and cultural minorities – in spite of the fact that these very minorities were colonized and oppressed by the countries on whose behalf they were fighting – were ignored, allowing whites to be constructed as the sole bearers of morality and justice. One wonders about the depth of harm of such distorted presentations of world history on a diverse and impressionable student body.

One can be certain that these students and indeed, most students across Ontario have heard such selective presentations each year. In this sense, the memorial ceremony is ritualistic and indoctrinating, with serious consequences for the self-worth and pride of students of colour.

One has to dig deeper and interrogate the false reasons provided for fighting the wars, and think critically about the emotionally-charged messages about “those who sacrificed their lives for our freedom.” The annual ritual of Remembrance Day falsely ascribes altruistic sacrifices made by hundreds of thousands of white men for their own societies’ and the world’s collective well-being. The constant reminder to new generations through the annual ritual of Remembrance Day seems to be that a big price has been paid on their behalf, and therefore they should be more appreciative and obedient to older generations.

As far as the daily singing of the national anthem (complemented by a reading of religious nature) is concerned, at least two major messages might be identified. Standing straight for the national anthem in honour of the modern state is an exercise in obedience, i.e. that the expectation to obey is a normal societal expectation. That message is constantly reinforced through the daily ritual. It is clearly designed to cultivate obedience, nationalism and discipline in students. The second message is deeper and more cryptic. The message is that the modern nation-state is the ultimate entity; everyone within its borders belongs to it, and therefore everyone must obey its rules and meet its obligations. In this way, the nation-state ensures its survival by continually trampling over the rights and legitimacy of indigenous peoples and identities

During another teaching event, on a nice day in the month of May, the TTC was used to get to a school close to Kensington Market for a field trip. The first item on the itinerary was to view a photo display of the history of the city blocks that the class would be touring. The display occupied an entire hall of a wing in that school. One of the expert teachers from the local school explained the display, and served as a guide for the rest of the tour.

Members of the class were given four areas of interest to choose one from and write about after the field trip. They included:

- synagogue
- businesses
- old Victorian homes
- markets and stores

The first old photograph on display was a huge white tent said to be the first Toronto Western General Hospital, followed by a line-up of a guard of honour, clothed in RCMP-like red uniforms with matching tall hats, being inspected by an obviously very important man (File: FINO05, p. 125). The important man was explained to be Colonel Denison, and the mansion was his residence. Colonel Denison was an English man who came to build up Toronto, appointed by the Queen to do so.

The next stop was at the back of Toronto Western General Hospital. What a contrast between the tent and that huge building. A short walk along Wales Avenue took us to Bellevue Square Park, a small park boxed by Bellevue, Wales and Augusta Avenues and Denison Square. On the south side of the park, on Wales Avenue stood MP Dan Heap's Victorian home. On the opposite side, on the North side of the park, stood a synagogue, where Colonel Denison's mansion used to be. As the class stood, viewing the park, with the synagogue behind them, the guide from the local school, said:

You see, there was nothing here before Colonel Denison came here to build the city. They brought Colonel Denison here to build Toronto and as a reward they gave him this huge land, where he built his mansion. (File: FINO05, p. 125)

At that point Mrs. Peterson interjected and asked the class, "When did Colonel Denison come to Toronto?"

"In 1890," answered Helen (African-Canadian), after a moment of silence.

"Close, he was sent in 1790," answered the guest guide.

"How old are you?" asked Randy, directing his question to the guide. He may not have comprehended the implications of the script provided at every corner, but that was his way of passively resisting and showing his boredom to what was taking place around him. She smiled but didn't answer.

Other streets that we criss-crossed before that history field trip came to an end included Oxford, Nassau, Denison, Bathurst, Dundas, Spadina, and College. Towards the end of the tour, the guide asked the class, "Where do you think the names of most of the streets came from? The early settlers brought the names with them," she answered after she was met with silence (File: FINO05, p. 126).

The field trip certainly dug out some historical facts, but was it selective in what it wanted to teach the students? Did it provide a balanced and all-inclusive exposure of the facts? There certainly was no mention that the land we have known as Toronto was a hunting, gathering and trading place for the first migrants, the Mississauga First Nation. It also did not mention that the neighbourhood had changed hands multiple

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times with respect to residents, from First Nations, to British, to Jewish, to Southern Europeans, to truly multicultural from the 1970s to 1985. It is even more multicultural today, in 2012. Although writing about the synagogue was part of the assignment, no explanation was given by the guide as to why Colonel Denison's mansion was torn down in 1914 to give way to the synagogue (File: FINO05, p. 132).

Although that particular field trip did not seem to be ritualistic, in that it was not an activity repeated again and again, like classroom activities related to Remembrance Day or Hallowe'en, the questions and details that the tour glossed over reflect the general trend of selective teaching of facts and events to get across certain view of the world.

Most of the teaching at the research site I visited - in language, social sciences, art, and music - is centred around statutory holidays, like Christmas and Easter, and European cultural and social events like Thanksgiving, Hallowe'en, and Remembrance Day, leaving little room for the insertion of holidays and cultural events from other cultures, like events significant to First Nations', or Kwanza or Ramadan or Hanukkah or Diwali, etc.

Perhaps Christmas is used as much as Remembrance Day as an episode of ritualistic teaching. What happened on Friday, December 20, 1985, the last day of school before the Christmas holiday, provided a good example of the use of a holiday as a tool for teaching. As announced continually leading up to this day, there was going to be a party and exchange of gifts just before dismissal, lasting for about an hour. The school day was over earlier, at 2:30 pm.

There were two tables full of gifts; one table with gifts from students to Mrs. Peterson and one with a gift from Mrs. Peterson for each student. Only some of the students remembered or were able to bring a gift for her. Gifts for Mrs. Peterson included mugs, plates, cups, dishes, perfume, a bottle of Italian wine, jam, chocolate packages, and bracelets. They came from Gus, Bilal, Sharifa, Theodora, Ellen, Paul, Susan, Nhie, Carla, Luigia, Anna, Kate, and Michelle; one after the other, they presented their individual gifts, including cards, to Mrs. Peterson. Many of these gifts came from non-Christian families who do not celebrate the occasion.

Mrs. Peterson read each card. After she read Anna's card, she commented, "Did your sister write that? That is a private joke" Mrs. Peterson went on as Anna smiled and giggled, perhaps signaling admission. She had taught Anna's older sister. Mrs. Peterson then pulled out two plastic bags full of Christmas cards, each wrapped up with a candy cane with the name of a student on each. First, she made a short speech on how Christmas is a time of happiness and sharing. Then she called each student by name, in alphabetical order, and handed them their gift. Uncharacteristically for this class, there was a higher noise level and a lot of laughter, and even the normally stoic Mrs. Peterson smiled once or twice.

#### SUMMARY

In this chapter I describe my ethnographic observations at Southview Community School. I found that students spent most of the school day in the formal setting,

the classroom, where activities were highly structured. The learning activities from day to day were very predictable; subjects were taught in sequence, almost always starting with news time, followed by English, math, science, social sciences, with music and French coming in early afternoon on intermittent days. One thing was quite clear: English and math took up the bulk of the school day, with English taking double the classroom time compared to math.

In the informal settings of the gym, schoolyard, etc. students had a choice in what they did and how they did it. There, they showed their resourcefulness and their ability to initiate and execute teaching and learning activities.

This chapter also showed that the pre-packaged teaching materials of the prescribed curriculum, as well as teaching activities organized around Western public and social events, such as Hallowe'en, Remembrance Day, and Christmas, prevented the diversification of the curriculum. To make matters worse, holidays and social events most of the children were familiar with were excluded from being the subject of teaching and learning. Equally significant is that the teaching material was perhaps old style, laced with racial, gender, and class bias. Women and racialized groups were presented as weak and evil respectively, and their contributions to Canadian society were ignored.

In the next chapter, I discuss the role of the teacher in presenting teaching material, as well as the processes she used for doing so. Student reaction to teaching and learning in this classroom will also be examined.

## CHAPTER 5

### **THE TEACHER-CENTRED VS. STUDENT-CENTRED CONTINUUM**

It cannot be said that every school and every classroom in Toronto has made an attempt to adopt student-centred teaching strategies, as defined in Chapter Two. My experience as a teacher tells me, quite to the contrary, that most classrooms remain teacher-centred, and we continue to suffer the consequences of that. This situation remains, in spite of the relentless efforts of some teachers, educational consultants, and researchers involve students as initiators of teaching and learning.

It should also be remembered, as indicated in Chapter Two, that there is no such thing as a purely student-centred education. What educators identify as student-centred education is at times student-centred, at other times teacher-centred and at other times, very much in between. At times, the teacher needs to take centre stage during which he/she will explain and lecture on things, especially when introducing new topics, and from time to time, in order to redirect the focus of a learning activity. At other times, the teacher allows students to engage in research and share knowledge in groups, present their findings to the class and give feedback and comments. Some teachers consult students on the future direction of classroom learning activities and even topics, while a few even go as far as engaging students in self-evaluation and peer evaluation.

#### LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND THE PERCEIVED ROLE OF THE TEACHER

A question central to my research is, what does the educational system perceive the role of the teacher to be? The answer is determined by the availability of teaching resources, the staff to student ratio, the willingness to incorporate in-service teacher training in a particular direction, the specific needs of the students, how learning activities are organized, etc. The values, beliefs and motivation of the teacher no doubt are also equally important.

Informally, in Mrs. Peterson's classroom, nothing would stop students from helping and consulting with one another whenever the situation allowed. In fact, I observed this on almost a daily basis over the course of this study. Students like Bilal and Helen often jumped on the opportunity to help fellow students, even during individual effort assignments. For example, the grade six students were sent to the library a couple of times during the course of the year to find a book each one of them needed to read for a book report. After making their selections quickly, Bilal and Helen were seen going around and helping a number of their classmates find a book. They are like the self-appointed troubleshooting dynamic duo of the class.



They were able to comment on some of the books they themselves had read, and recommended them.

Even in more structured classrooms, where students rarely left their seats, except when instructed to do so, students found informal ways of asking each other for help in spelling and math. Information flowed with ease among those who asked for help and those who provided it. Sadly, this free exchange of information did not include those who were shy and intimidated, nor did it include those who were disengaged. Those out of the loop included the most recent immigrants, like Trisha, Kemba, Yanina, Tanya, and those whom I came to identify as the disengaged grade five black boys: Akil, Daniel and Andy.

It was clear to me that the helpers enjoyed helping, and that those on the receiving end appreciated getting help from fellow students. At times, it appeared that their peers could explain difficult concepts much more easily than the teacher could. Despite this, any communication between students was not encouraged in the classroom. The teacher would look disapprovingly, or ask the communicating parties to be quiet (File: FINO05).

The daily routine did not lend itself to student-to-student interaction. Interaction was usually teacher-initiated, as indicated in Chapter Four, "One Day in the Life of a Classroom," and it was mainly between the teacher and the class as a whole. Formally, the only one-on-one interaction was mostly between the teacher and a student, with the student standing around her desk asking questions and the teacher providing an answer, usually as she sat behind her desk.

Take, for example, the first learning activity of the day, "News Time." There is nothing more formal than standing for the national anthem. For that occasion, students stay at their desks, arranged in rows. Seconds after that, the teacher leads the way to the 'informal' side of the room, and she sits on the rocking chair. Students follow and sit on the floor, forming a semi-circle in front of her.

As soon as students sit comfortably on the carpet, those who have brought the daily news scoop raise their hands. Mrs. Peterson, looking down at them from a higher position (from roughly a 45 degree angle above) names those who will deliver the news for that day. Every member of the class is looking at the teacher, if they are on their best behaviour. The eye contact of those who tell the stories is mostly with her. Therefore, communication is from student to teacher in that case. Mrs. Peterson's role is to decide who gets the floor to speak.

Students brought clippings, all scooped from the print media. Not all print media sources were used, however, because students were specifically instructed to collect stories only from the Toronto Star and Globe and Mail. It was obvious that using what is known as "ethnic print media," as well as other sources of stories, could have enriched the teaching material. What was curious was that there were minimal questions, comments and discussion following the news; in fact most of the time there was none.

Typically, the kind of conversation that transpired during News Time was short, and mostly dealt with clarification of what was revealed. For example, as soon as Phillip spoke about the Quebec Nordiques winning again, Mrs. Peterson asked what



the ranking of that team was at the time, to which Paul shouted “first!” On the same day, Helen spoke of Hurricane Juan killing a lot of people in Mexico and the U.S. Daniel, a recent immigrant from Britain, and the child of a Jamaican mother and an African father, asked if Juan could come to Toronto, too (File: FINO05, p. 14). He seemed worried. Invariably, no personal comments and opinions about the events were expressed. The underlying causes of events were not discussed, nor were possible responses of various levels of government in the affected areas. As soon as “News Time” was over - after about five to ten students were able to share their stories - Mrs. Peterson headed back to her desk, and so did the students, ending the only ostensibly student-driven teaching and learning that took place in her classroom.

The full extent of student engagement was limited to “Show and Tell”. During this time, students took turns reading from a book and presenting it to the class, and this was usually followed by a very structured discussion facilitated by the teacher. Having students engage in class discussion or any kind of interactive and co-operative learning was not part of the general plan.

Whether it was social sciences, math, science, reading, writing, or spelling, Mrs. Peterson assigned work and students strove (at least most of them) to complete the assignment within the time given. At times, she stood in front of the class and explained concepts, particularly when introducing new topics. Most of the time, lessons were explained to the grade sixes and fives separately. While she taught a lesson to one group, the other grade level worked quietly and individually.

Another observation I made was that movement from one type of activity to another did not leave much time in between. The effect was that slow performers were caught without completing their assignments most of the time. That, in turn, meant they would have to complete it during the last half-hour of the day, set aside for completion of unfinished work. Some students - like Theodora, Trisha, Sonya and Yasmina - stayed behind most days, and completed what they were unable to do during the regular school day. Others, like Gus, Donavan, Akil, Daniel, and Randy usually created excuses about why they could not stay behind to complete their incomplete work and left with everyone else. A clear-cut discrepancy emerged as to how boys and girls dealt with unfinished work. That was an early indicator in the achievement gap between the sexes.

The swift movement between learning activities was definitely a source of anxiety and trepidation among a good number of students. However, not once were students observed coming forth to request or suggest to Mrs. Peterson that more time be allotted between learning activities. Yet they shared ideas among themselves on how Mrs. Peterson could slow down the pace. From my vantage point, sitting among the students, I was able to gauge their opinions. During my interview with Gus, I asked him what he would change if he were the teacher. Time was the first issue he raised:

If I were the teacher, I would give more time between assignments to finish the work we are supposed to finish. Sometimes we are trying to finish spelling and Mrs. Peterson wants us to drop that and do some writing. (File: STIN06:11)

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The strategy of assigning barely enough time to complete a learning activity may have worked to minimize idle talk or other discipline-related problems, but may have had an adverse effect on student collaborative learning and problem-solving. In any case, the strategy definitely minimized communication among students and between students and the teacher.

When she was not on the rocking chair, the teacher remained by her desk or stood in front of the class when explaining something. It was unusual to see the teacher moving between desks to find out first-hand how each student was doing on any particular assignment (File: FINO05). Most of the time, it was students who approached Mrs. Peterson's desk to get individual help. At times, she invited those who needed help to come to her desk, but she was rarely seen walking through the aisles between the rows of desks to check students' work. Often, as they got busy doing desk work, she would be marking a pile of work she had taken in earlier.

Most of Mrs. Peterson's information on how students were doing came through assignments she collected for marking. By the same token, most of the time, students got informed of how they had performed on the work assigned through feedback from collected and marked assignments. By and large, that was also how parents got feedback on how their children were performing. It seemed that this teaching strategy as a whole worked to minimize contact between students and the teacher, as well as between and among the students themselves. The same strategy also minimized informal communication, not only between the teacher and students, but also between students, including communication outside a learning activity. I never understood why Mrs. Peterson assigned so much work. I could only speculate that she used it as a control mechanism to minimize discipline problems.

One could say that the architecture and appearance of Southview Community School was made to reflect the recommendations of the Hall-Dennis Report. The school was rebuilt wall-less and window-less, with new classrooms almost double the size of regular classrooms, with a lot of informal space without furniture to facilitate freedom of movement among students and to allow the pursuit of individual interests of each child in the classroom. In short, changes were made by the powers that be to facilitate child-centred education. I asked the principal about the philosophy behind the wall-less and windowless school:

I don't know that there is a philosophy behind that, but it provides more space, good for air conditioning, easy to move the partitioning and therefore flexible. Kids come from crowded homes, up to seven people in a couple of rooms; it is useful to provide space where and when it is needed. They could be by themselves by partitioning their space. (File: PAIN06, p. 54)

The principal explained that the new set-up is to reflect the new spirit of opening the school to the community. She continued, "As part of our PR work, every kindergarten teacher has to visit the home of every child." What is not clear is whether or not the information gathered by visiting homes is put to good use. The principal's statement did not suggest positive consequences that would follow from home visits. In fact, I

#### THE TEACHER-CENTRED VS. STUDENT-CENTRED CONTINUUM

had the impression that visits could lead to a negative judgment when the principal described some families where, “up to seven people in a couple of rooms,” as if that limits their learning potential.

The change of the school name from ‘Southview Public School’ to ‘Southview Community School’ was also supposed to signify a new era in public education. It was meant to signal the opening up of the school to more parent participation and more community involvement in education. As I show in this study, not many of the intended changes seemed to have trickled down onto the front lines of the classroom.

#### THE LIMITATIONS OF A SPLIT-LEVEL CLASSROOM

In my classroom observation, I watched the teacher constantly rationing her time between the two grade levels, grades five and six. The expectation that goes with a split-level class is that she has to prepare two lessons and teach those lessons on each subject area to two grade levels on the same day. On top of that, this was a large class of 30 children, many of them needing remedial help. This raises a couple of questions about the rationale of the split-level classroom. Indeed what is the rationale and what are the conditions conceived to go along with its existence?

In education policy, the stated reason for split-level classrooms is to inspire the younger children by pairing them with higher level students. The assumption here is that there will be a chance to interact and help and exchange ideas between the younger and older students. At least that was the commonly expressed rationale behind the arrangement that I heard. In addition, there would be opportunities for role modeling by the higher grade students. In fact, all the grade five students in Mrs. Peterson’s split-level class were either struggling to perform at grade level or were totally lost, and performing at grades four, three, or even two in math. The same can be said in the case of Akil. The principal later confirmed that she selected lower achievers from the grade five level children to join Mrs. Peterson’s split level-class. As far as the grade six students were concerned, Mrs. Peterson’s preference was the major factor - at least from the children’s point of view. In other words, they believed that they were in her class because she had picked them, and they were very proud to have been picked by her.

There seemed to be a built-in disconnect between the policy and decision-makers, on the one hand, and the demands inside the classroom on the other. The Hall-Dennis Report recommended a considerably reduced class-size to go along with increased interactions inside the classroom. It was recommended that there be a lot of specialized staff provisions to look after remedial needs. In the school of this study, neither the reduction in class-size nor the increase in specialized staff and educational assistants took place. The only visible change was that more educational assistants were placed in kindergarten classrooms.

The situation left teachers like Mrs. Peterson in an impossible dilemma. Neither child-centred nor student-centred education could have been implemented in the conditions of her classroom. More than two decades later, a People for Education Report argued that, due to the prevailing conditions, split-level classes do not work.

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The report states that “Split grades are nearly impossible for teachers to handle under the province’s rigid, jam-packed curriculum. ... Teachers with split grades say they feel stressed and rushed” (The Toronto Star, Sunday, November 4, 2007).

However, Mrs. Peterson’s role in the selection of teaching materials and the lack of diversity in the curriculum is clear. No one can deny the possibility of more inclusive education in a teacher-centred classroom, but that will depend on the teacher. Mrs. Peterson offered a solidly Eurocentric curriculum, and ultimately, that was her choice. I did try to raise the issue of lack of diversity in her teaching material, even though I could have been more forceful, but I was shown my limits firmly but politely, when Mrs. Peterson either ignored my questions or repeated vague remarks she had already made earlier. For example, with respect to Mrs. Peterson’s decision to send Trisha to special education:

I raised my doubts about how sending Trisha to special education could help her, knowing full well that special education is meant to be for those with learning disabilities who will remain in special education. In my view, Trisha did not seem to be a candidate for that. Mrs. Peterson repeated exactly what she told Trisha’s mother when she suggested that Trisha should go for special education. She felt that “rather than continue to underachieve and get frustrated. She will at least learn some skills in special education.

### COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATION IN THE GYM AND SCHOOLYARD

Asked about their favorite subject, most of the students in the class said gym. Others identified recess time as their favorite time of the day, including the time outside of school hours (that is, the time before school started and after school ended). A few responded that math was their favorite subject, and a few more said spelling, others mentioned writing or music. Further investigation as to why gym and recess came out on top revealed that students enjoyed having full control of what the game was going to be, and how it was going to be played. It all came down to how much say they had in the direction of the activity. As products of a classroom environment whose direction was largely dictated by adults, it was obvious that the children consciously celebrated the spaces in which they had decision-making power. As Gus put it, “During gym, I can team up with anyone I like, and during recess, if I get bored with one game, I tell my friend to play something else” (File: STIN06, p. 14).

In my own teaching, I have asked my applied-level high school students about their favorite subject, and a significant number of them also say gym. I suspect that the reason, once again, is their preference for having a say in what they do. This is consistent with their identification of strict and regimented teachers as “whack” - meaning uptight about everything, irrelevant or outdated, and therefore, not cool. Meanwhile, teachers who consult with their students and are open to suggestions about classroom activities and materials are “cool.”

#### THE TEACHER-CENTRED VS. STUDENT-CENTRED CONTINUUM

There is a strong indication in the data that it is a sign of disengagement and a form of passive resistance when gym and recess are identified as students' favorite subjects. None of the high-performing students in the class identified gym or recess as their favorite school time. All those attending enrichment programs said that math or English or both were their favorite subjects. Interestingly the four most recent immigrants – Trisha, Ahrika, Sonya, and Yasmina – identified either spelling or writing as their favourite subjects, although they are in grade six, but performing at grade five levels in reading, writing and spelling. Their continued preference for these subjects showed that they have not given up, and they were not about to disengage yet.

One thing was very clear, the class came alive during gym and recess at all times. In the gym, Mrs. Peterson took an observer status, and let the children organize and lead activities. They even got to decide who assumed team leadership most of the time. Recess time was the most active time for everyone. Even the most disengaged kids in grade five – Akil, Randy and Daniel – were busy, switching from one game to another. They might start by playing 'Spies', then switch to playing touch tag, or hide-and-seek. Most of the time, they would team up with other friends from the other grade five class, and continue to play their second favorite game after "Spies" and "Counterspies" that of "Detectives." The possibilities for what they could do in the schoolyard were endless; if only similar strategies could have been used to harness their energies and get them excited during classroom learning activities.

#### PASSIVE RESISTANCE: FORMS OF STUDENT CONTESTATION

The students had no part in determining what was taught and how it was taught. This was already decided by the prepackaged curriculum material assembled by the textbook publishers and school board, and endorsed by the teacher without any kind of modification. Even when critics paved the way for contestation, Mrs. Peterson ignored their lead and stuck to the original message of the publishers and school boards. Accordingly, students were guided to follow the original message and frame of thinking presented. As suggested earlier, the curriculum was solidly Eurocentric and biased against women and racialized people.

As a researcher, my main interest was to find out the level of student satisfaction with and engagement in their education, and to determine how classroom activities were conducted. Among other things, I was not sure about the level and intensity of their enthusiasm for or resistance to the teacher-driven, regimented daily schedule. Specifically, I wanted to find out what kind of resistance was employed (if any) by 10 to 12 year-old students.

I should point out at this junction that although I had the opportunity to observe the class in action for eight months, I cannot say that I knew every member of the class as well as I was able to understand the 12 students I worked with closely. However, it was a group that was representative not only of the classroom makeup, but also of

the school, in terms of cultural diversity, race, gender and academic achievement. I should also add that the sample included some of the most visible, vocal and outgoing students in the class. Therefore, my comments on passive resistance should be viewed from that perspective.

It did not take very long for a class profile to emerge. In my observations, I organized students into three categories. At the top were the *high achievers*, most of whom attended one or more enrichment programs. Most of them seemed to have very amicable relationships with their teacher. They were a bit less than one-third of the class and with one exception, they were all girls. The second category was what I called the *survivors*. These students were operating at grade level, but not blooming. They were more than one-third of the class. The third category consisted of the *underachievers*, all of them students operating below grade level. This group was over-represented by boys and black children. By contrast, there was no black child amongst the enriched group (see Chapter Seven for a more detailed analysis of achievement levels in the class).

My understanding was that not all those in the third category were disengaged. Some of them were still trying very hard to catch up, and seemed hopeful of someday being able to achieve as well as (or perhaps even better than) their high-achieving peers). They loved learning and coming to school every day. A good example of that would be Trisha, who was fully engaged. There were others, however, like Donovan, who performed at grade level, along with most of those in the third category, who would not take any initiative to learn. They tried to complete assigned work, but did not care if they did not and would not ask for help.

Across all categories, students did not resist in the same way or with the same intensity, but they all resisted. For example, even those in the enriched programs joined in condemning the selection process for the enriched courses. In that sense, resistance was not just a symptom of disengagement. On the contrary, most of the disengaged students - like Akil - were not terribly visible in the class, and did not give their voice on anything. My observations, as illustrated by Trisha's cousin who is extensively quoted in chapter six, indicated that they might have awakened later in intermediate and secondary levels of school and become more vocal. Evidently, disengaged students' form of resistance in this elementary school classroom was indifferent to assigned activities, unless they were accused of doing something they did not do or asked to do activities they disliked. Much of students' resistance was expressed by those who were disengaged. I learned a great deal about their coping mechanisms during my observation and interviews with them. Having no say in what and how they were taught left them with no choice but to develop a coping mechanism of passive resistance. Their short-term survival strategy included appearing as though they were striding along, but not embracing their school experiences fully. A reaction of open defiance, exchange of angry words, fading out or dropping out of school was out-of-the-question for them because of their age and grade level. However, when interviewed outside of the classroom by an adult who was not their teacher, they had a lot to say about almost everything, as the interview notes show.



Students' resistance was expressed much of the time through body language, sharing negative comments with one another, making jokes as a way of dealing with boredom, sharing their frustrations with classmates and parents; sometimes through closing their bedroom doors, crying and developing depression, in some cases, by using unacceptable language, or outright condemning a particular teaching strategy amongst one another or in conversation with their parents. All of these behaviours were practiced "under the table" so to speak, and none of these forms of complaint was supposed to reach the teacher. This is what makes their form of contestation *passive resistance*.

For the most part, school routines were contested in two major ways: through the use of defiant body language, and the verbal expression of opposition to classmates, parents or to myself. There were also exchanges of dirty jokes – mostly during desk-work activities – as well as the boys pretending that were grabbing the rear ends of the girls during choir practice, always successfully evading detection by the teacher. Under the table, the boys exhibited considerable sexist behavior both towards the girls and among themselves.

On the surface, the class was always on its best behaviour, orderly and neat. I observed no incidence of unpleasant exchange between Mrs. Peterson and a student or group of students during the entire eight months of my study. This might be attributable both to Mrs. Peterson's classroom disciplining strategy and her general demeanor. This tall, blond, imposing personality and former aspiring ballerina and model proved to be a master disciplinarian. Her demeanor was that of a no-nonsense personality. I never saw her smiling or at ease with the class. She was always conservatively dressed in long skirts and medium high heels. It was clear that this middle-aged woman impressed the children, particularly the girls. She not only had their utmost respect, but also, in some cases, their adulation. This was mostly due to the way she carried herself, and the way she seemed to know what she was doing as a teacher. All she had to do was look disapprovingly at the students, and all intended transgressions stopped. Beneath the surface, however, other feelings were taking place.

As an expression of boredom and resistance, students' used body language. For example, one day, just before lunch, Mrs. Peterson was in the process of presenting a book talk, with a display full of books in front of her. Susan (a white student) turned to Adrianna (African-Canadian), began making faces and said "boring." Adrianna responded in kind. Such resistance seemed to never reach Mrs. Peterson. This was by no means very serious resistance, rather an expression of disapproval and dissatisfaction with the teacher's choice of assignment.

Sometimes, students exchanged dirty jokes, noticeably and particularly during quiet desk-work. One quiet afternoon, both grades were working on a writing project. Mrs. Peterson was busy marking previous assignments (quiet desk-work and marking combinations happened a lot in this classroom), when all of a sudden, I saw Donovan (an African-Canadian student) tear Paul's (a white student's) work into pieces, and give it back to him in shreds. I thought that all hell was going to break loose. Paul uttered something that I thought was incomprehensible and surprisingly

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not very angry. They all (about five of them, including Paul) laughed, though in very controlled, quiet way, so as not to be noticed by Mrs. Peterson:

I asked: What does it mean (about what Paul said)?:

Patrick: Don't tell Mr. Sium (warns the others).

Donovan: You should not have said it in front of him. Now we are free to tell him.

Michelle (white): This is what it means (as she writes it and pushes it in front of me). It read, "Holy pro there big has my nachos."

I was still left puzzled as to what it meant. Noticing this, they called on Sonya (a Spanish-speaking student) to translate for me - although it seemed that they all knew what it meant. She felt shy to do so, at which point I started to suspect that it was something considered dirty. Finally Donovan writes, "nachos means balls." Among the five of them, no one was willing to translate fully, and I did not feel comfortable pressing them to do so.

On another occasion, the class was working quietly on an assignment on the human body. They had a skeleton in front of them and they were labeling it and describing the functions of various organs. As Helen (an African-Canadian student) returned from the washroom and was about to sit down, Paul (white) was standing in front of her desk, tightly squeezed between two desks. Paul is a chubby boy. Helen asked without looking up, "Whose big ass is sticking up over my desk?" Paul responded, "Smell it, smell a lot nicer than yours." They all laughed, Paul and Helen included. On occasion, Paul, flanked by Donovan and Bilal (Pakistani), would pretend to grab Susan's (white) bum. Somehow Susan was made aware of what was happening, even though they sat behind her. She would briefly look back and smile, then return to her work. One did not need to scratch deep below the surface to notice the expression of sexist behavior among the boys.

The jokes they played were mostly on each other. Gus was usually on the giving end of jokes. One time, however, the joke came crashing down on him. He innocently went to Mrs. Peterson and tried to ask a question while she was in conversation on the in-house phone. This did not please her at all. As soon as she ended her telephone conversation, she told Gus to write a page about what he did wrong. He was confused because he did not know what he had done. He tried to get some clarification from her. At first she ignored him. "Poor Gus he doesn't know what he is supposed to do", said Donovan as he was joined by everyone in laughter. Gus, in the meantime, was not laughing, because the last thing he wanted to do was stay after school to complete the punishment. Mrs. Peterson added, "I don't know what you were doing out of your seat." "What else dummy, she wants you to write a whole page of, I will not leave my seat without permission," suggested Bilal, to a chorus of more laughter. Gus quickly wrote a full page of that statement and took it to Mrs. Peterson for approval. To his relief, she approved.

More seriously, students also expressed their disagreements and disappointments. Many of them had insightful comments about the teaching material, and the intentions



behind it. Gus (Greek) and Donovan (African-Canadian) were good friends and they spent a lot of time together, including outside school time - since they lived close to each other. I found both boys to be very bright and very insightful, but at the same time, the least ambitious of all their peers with their scholastic performance. They had no motivation to achieve higher grades than they were, and were quite content to just get by. They were the type of student who throws his or her arms in the air to celebrate passing with just 50% on any assignment or test. With no intervention to redirect them to achieve higher averages, they were probably headed towards lower streams in high school, and eventually into the world of blue collar occupation.

With respect to Mrs. Peterson's teaching strategies, students had ideas as to what was missing. For example, Trisha had some definite recommendations that Mrs. Peterson could follow to improve her teaching. Just putting an X on what was wrong was not enough. Trisha suggested the teacher should tell the student what the correct replacement was, so that the student did not have to guess the answer. That way, they would know what to do next. Trisha also disagreed with the strategy of placing someone in grade six, only to turn around and identify them to be performing at a lower level. She felt that if she was performing at a grade five level, then she wanted to be labeled as a grade five student. Of course, out of high regard for her teacher, and also due to uncertainty as to whether or not she would be understood through her Jamaican accent, Trisha never said any of this to Mrs. Peterson. She expressed all of this to me in the comfort of her living room, in the presence of her mother and her cousins (File: PAIN06, pp. 2-4).

All Trisha wanted was to bring an end to the source of her confusion. She really wanted to know whether she was a grade six or a grade five student. However, her suggestion carried deeper implications. In some ways the "no child fails" policy allows every student to move along together by age, regardless whether they earned passing grades or not. This conveniently hides the failure rate among students, and therefore allows the school to avoid criticism for failing to educate all children to earn passing grades at their grade level - at least in the short-term. In other words, the "no child fails" policy allows school boards to be less accountable, and to shift responsibilities for individual student failures to households and communities.

I was surprised to hear how much of what is considered to be foul language flowed among students, even at that age level. I heard nothing racial or ethnically insensitive, but they dished out mild personal insults to one another freely and with ease, yet this behavior was totally controlled and under the table. I sat among them for a good part of the year, and I noticed that it took them quite some time to desensitize themselves to my presence and feel free to behave as they would without me there. At the same time, it seemed to me that they wanted to bring their own worlds into the classroom. However, the school did not show any willingness to allow them to do that. This forced them to live in three almost distinct worlds: the world of the school, the world of their homes, and the world they built together with their peers. They had to contend with satisfying the demands of all three worlds. Clearly, the world that they felt most at ease within was the last one. The other two worlds seemed boring, and

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had to be peppered with some of the elements from the world they created together. I believe this is why the students had to smuggle some of their shared world into the classroom, using passive resistance strategies to do so.

By the time the students opened up to me, I had already interviewed 12 of them in a one-on-one setting. At that point, I convened a focus group with 13 students. I decided to make the language/black heritage program the first topic of conversation. It was a program in which they were all enrolled at one time or another. My purpose was to probe their understanding of teaching and learning strategies by comparing the teaching in their heritage program with that of their regular school program. Some of them, like Trisha and Gus, definitely did not agree with how Mrs. Peterson taught them. However, their respect for and fear of Mrs. Peterson as a teacher was unflinching. She knew exactly what she was doing at all times. So I thought it would make a good comparison to get them to talk about the heritage program.

The language/heritage programs that the students were enrolled in at the time of the interview were black heritage (Trisha, Donovan, Shrika and Helen), Greek (Gus and Theodora), Hungarian (Paul), Italian (Maria), Punjabi (Bilal), Spanish (Sonya and Yasmina), Vietnamese (Phuong), and Urdu (Tabasum).

Just before the group interview started, I assured them, as I always did, that whatever they were about to share with me was in confidence. The exchange continued as follows:

Gus: You are not going to tell anybody, not even Mrs. Peterson?

Researcher: Not even Mrs. Peterson is going to know about what you Tell me. So feel free to act as much as possible, as if the 13 of you are alone.

Bilal: So we can say it stinks or it is shit if we wanted to?

Researcher: If that is how you talk among yourselves sometimes, yes. So all of you have taken the language/black heritage program, what do you think about it?

Maria: It stinks (laughter from all).

Gus: It is shit.

Theodora: It is hopeless (more laughter).

Researcher: Okay, now I am interested to hear why you think so.

Theodora: Work is so easy.

Helen: The work they give takes two seconds to do, and they expect you to take 30 minutes.

Tabasum: I am there to learn, but she wants me to teach the younger ones, when I don't even know myself.

#### THE TEACHER-CENTRED VS. STUDENT-CENTRED CONTINUUM

Sonya: My Spanish heritage teacher teaches you everything you need to know in one hour, as if that is the only time you have in your life, only to repeat it the following week.

Paula: They teach you how to eat, which I have known since I started eating (laughter).

Theodora: She teaches us about something we should learn later, and then she asks questions about something we never learned at all.

Bilal: The work is very easy.

Researcher: Your dislike of the language/black heritage program is unanimous. By a show of hands, how many of you want see the program stopped?

Surprisingly, following their unanimous criticism, only four of the students in this focus groups said that the programs should be scrapped, while nine wanted to keep them, with some changes:

Researcher: It is clear that most of you would like to see the program continue, but what kinds of changes would you recommend?

Donovan: Longer recess and more gym.

Only Gus said yes to Donovan's suggestion, but the rest offered an enthusiastic and unanimous "no." At this point, I felt that some of the most recent immigrants may have felt intimidated, and that perhaps they were not volunteering to express their opinion. So I asked, "Trisha did you want say something?"

Trisha: They should give enough work to the time we are there, and they should have separate classes for the younger ones. I don't min teaching the younger ones, but I also want to learn.

Bilal: They should not think that you know a lot. If I did, I would no have come to learn.

Shrika: We should have more field trips (to which everyone shouted "yes in support).

Theodora: By the end of the year, we did not even have one trip to anywhere!

Trisha: By the end of the day, I was dirty and tired. They should hav more teachers.

By the end of the session there were only two students - Phuong and Yasmina - who had not said anything. I asked them if they have any ideas that they want to share. They passed on my offer. There was no problem with Phuong's ability to express herself, but Yasmina was always worried that she may not express herself in the way everyone expected of her.

Over all, the group's comments suggest that their resistance to the way the language/black heritage program was taught was based on insightful knowledge of selection of appropriate teaching material and choice of teaching methodology. They were able to identify that the material that was too easy, or too difficult, and therefore beyond the grade level. It is worth considering how a very recent immigrant like Trisha could make such astute observations and perceptive comments on issues such as the level of teaching material, teaching methodology and age-appropriate groupings. This is even more interesting when we recall that Trisha was operating at a grade five level, and too old to be in grade six. She was, at the same time, thoughtful and very bright, but she had the most coveted asset of all - she was willing to work very hard to excel. Despite being left behind, she put on a brave face, and kept her morale very high. In private, however, she was struggling to maintain her composure due to the fact that she was performing poorly in subject areas she had identified as her favorites, such as spelling.

The focus group interview was instructive to me beyond what their comments and insights could show. To no one's surprise, newcomers to Canada, like Trisha, Yasmina and Shrika, never felt at ease to offer their comments freely like the others. Her lack of enough English, in the case of Yasmina, or speaking English with a distinct accent, in the case of Trisha and Shrika, were powerful silencing factors. I could see that they were struggling, and thinking about what they were going to say, and how they were going to say it. They worried about whether or not they would be able to say what they had in mind. It took some nudging and encouraging get them started. Once they began, they were quite animated and articulate, especially Trisha. Students like Trisha and Shrika needed unequivocal assurance that it was perfectly normal to speak accented English. Sadly, they did not receive such assurance in the classroom.

In the focus group, I also probed students' sense of equity, justice and fairness. They all understood the process by which students were selected and sent for enrichment programs in a neighboring school. Shortly after Mrs. Peterson had hinted in class that a few more students would be sent for enrichment, I wanted to know what they thought of the selection process that was used. As their own narration goes, a test was administered to children who were selected by their teachers. Those who scored high averages on all or most subjects were sent for what is termed as *general enrichment*, i.e. enriched courses in all subjects. Otherwise, those who scored over 90% on a test on a particular subject were sent to the enrichment program in that particular subject only. Those who were selected for general enrichment were bussed almost every day to attend an hour-long class. Those who were selected for one subject went one day a week.

I asked if the selection process for enrichment programs was fair. First, I wanted to confirm who went for general enrichment. Bilal jumped at the chance to answer:

Some of us in grade five were selected by our teachers to take the test for enrichment. In September, Mrs. Peterson announced that Amy (Chinese),

#### THE TEACHER-CENTRED VS. STUDENT-CENTRED CONTINUUM

Nhie (Vietnamese), Ellen (white), and Susan (white) were selected for general enrichment, and I was chosen to go for math enrichment. (File: FINO05, p. 55)

I wanted to know why more than the five students Bilal mentioned were going for enrichment. Adrianna (African-Canadian, from Guyana) answered with some sense of dismay at what had happened:

In September, Mrs. Peterson said that Tabasum (Pakistani) will go for math and drama, Michelle (white) for writing and drama, and Anna (white) for spelling, but there was no test.

This discussion arose in November of 1985 because the vice principal had urged teachers to nominate more children for enrichment in all subjects. Mrs. Peterson had explained that the enrichment head at that schools said that there was more room in the enrichment programs, and contributing schools were asked to send more children. There were rumours circulating that Mrs. Peterson had hinted that Phuong (Vietnamese) would go for general enrichment, Paul (Hungarian) may go for art and Carla (Italian) may go for drama. Those rumors triggered some negative reactions among the students:

Bilal: If Phuong goes, the whole class should go.

Donovan: If Phuong goes, even Trisha should be allowed to go.

Adrianna: Carla copies me all the time. If she goes, even Yasmina should go.

Their condemnation of the selection process was unanimous among the seven to eight of them around me. They recognized the privilege and honor that came with it, and they thought that those privileges were being disbursed subjectively and inequitably.

One cannot undermine the students' sense of fairness and equity. They may not have been able to conduct a class and race-based analysis, or point out the racial and class bias that determined which students were selected for enrichment, but they understood that the process was marred by inequitable and often arbitrary variables. It was my sense that they were able to detect racial bias better than they could class bias.

#### SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have shown that much of the everyday life of the class was spent completing assignments, and that much of the communication between the teacher and students was focused on them. Students completed assignments and the teacher marked them, and returned them, at times, during the same period; other times, they were returned the next day. They were constantly reminded that if they had a question to ask the teacher. Student-to-student communication for the purpose of seeking or providing help was not officially sanctioned. Informally, however, students sought

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and received help from fellow students. At times, students like Bilal took pleasure in moving around among his peers with offers of help.

The swift transition between learning activities did not favour slower learners, auditory learners, or underachievers in general. The movement from task to task was swift, and did not allow extra time for completion. The only option was to stay behind at the end of the day, which was not strictly enforced. Therefore some students' assignments were never completed, placing them even further behind other members of the class.

I never observed participatory teaching methods, such as debates, research and student presentations, collaborative group work, and so on. The only kind of group discussion that I observed was the kind when the teacher had to explain a field trip or to introduce a new topic. Again, this was primarily just the teacher relaying information or explaining basic concepts, and then fielding routine questions. Perhaps, this being a split-level classroom of 31 students in total, did not make it conducive to more participatory teaching strategies.

In the second part of this chapter, I discussed how most students in Mrs. Peterson's class passively resisted and reacted to what was taught and how it was taught. The degree of their resistance may have varied, but most students resisted in one form or another. For example, even some of the most favoured students in the class, like Bilal and Susan - themselves enriched students - voiced their objections to the ways in which students were selected for enrichment. They did not trust the selection process and questioned its fairness. The fact that they did not take their disagreements to the teacher or principal made their form of disagreements *passive resistance*.

In the informal settings of the gym and the schoolyard, things happened in a different manner. Students were in charge of deciding what types of activities they engaged in and how they engaged in them. They were able to prove they were capable of initiating and executing teaching and learning activities.

In Chapter Six, I will examine the role of parents in Southview Community School, and discuss the school's reception to what parents wanted to contribute to the school, and to what they had to offer.

## CHAPTER 6

### **PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION: VERTICAL MOSAIC IN ACTION**

In 1965, sociologist John Porter selected class, race, ethnicity, and time of immigration to Canada as variables and performed a statistical analysis based on census information collected by Statistics Canada over several decades (Porter 1965). Based on his findings, he described Canadian society as a vertical multicultural mosaic. He found that some racial and ethnic groups were treated as inferiors, just as the uneducated labouring classes migrating from Europe had been one generation earlier. These groups found themselves at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. In addition, he found that not much was expected of the most recent immigrants, and they were badly received.

My study was conducted 20 years after Porter put forth his analysis, however, not much had changed. In fact, I found that people continued to be treated differentially based on race, class, gender, and on how recently they immigrated to Canada. While previous chapters have focused on students, here I will discuss the experience of parents of children attending Southview Community School.

Before I explore the general trends among parents, however, I would like to present the struggles of one mother to secure a better education for her daughter. Her story illustrates the frustrations that racialized families contend with as they encounter the school system in Canada.

#### THE STRUGGLE OF A BLACK MOTHER AGAINST THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

It is better there (in Jamaica). They teach them very well. They don't tell you, Trisha is in grade six, but backward and working in grade five. They make sure if one is in grade six is truly in grade six, not in grade five. It is true, there are more materials to teach with here, and they identify the problem, but do nothing about it. (File PAINO6:2)

Doris Paterson was the first parent I interviewed. In the comfort of her own living room, she explained her fears and frustrations with her daughter's education. She is the mother of Trisha Paterson, one of the students I observed closely and interviewed for this study. When I knocked at the door, it was Trisha who opened it, thinking that she was also being interviewed, due to some miscommunication on my part. In fact, I had already interviewed her several times, and did not want to torture her anymore with my constant questions. Mrs. Paterson's 22 year-old nephew was also eager to

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tell me his own story of grief, frustration and denial to the right of equal educational opportunities to which he felt entitled.

In the above quote, Mrs. Paterson was answering my question as to how she compared the school systems of Jamaica and Canada. As she spoke, the nephew was itching to add his own comments. He literally exploded with a passionate commentary before she ended her last sentence.

They may have more material here in Canada, but they don't understand the kid. This school system is designed for European kids. A kid from the West Indies could understand them (teachers) but they don't understand him. Then you get confused, when you are new, you get confused. You kind of wonder why it is that they don't understand me. Then you get shy, because everyone is making fun of you, and when the teacher talks to you, you keep quiet, because you are afraid she is not going to understand. Then she says to your mother "he is retarded" or "he has hearing problem or sight problem." I was in grade six when I came to this country, and at the end of grade eight, they handed me this paper which says I will go to East View Park Secondary School (not real name), a basic level school, the following September. They consulted neither with my mother nor with me. (File PAIN06:3)

Trisha's cousin's comments spoke to the issue of how newly immigrated students are silenced by our school system. The language that they bring with them to the schools is bound to be different, perhaps sounding different, with a distinctive accent, as in the case of students from the Caribbean. It does not matter that they spoke English before they arrived, albeit a different variety of English. They are blamed for the fact that their teachers do not understand them. This leaves them with feelings of shame and embarrassment. According to Mrs. Paterson's nephew, this is how he was silenced.

Usually, I scheduled between one and one-and-a-half hours for interviews with parents. With most parents, I was able to wrap up within an hour-and-a-half. My interview with Mrs. Paterson and her nephew went on for two-and-a-half hours, which attests to the intensity of disenchantment, anger and injustice they experienced and shared with me, perhaps their first willing listener. What emerged by the end of the interview was a portrait of a thoughtful and intelligent family for whom education within the Canadian education system was clearly a struggle for each member of the household. Ten years later, Trisha would be fighting the same battles that her cousins had fought before her.

Mrs. Paterson's nephew continued: "I was enrolled in Level Three [basic level was the lowest level of the streams among basic, general, academic, and gifted levels. The enrichment programs that some of Mrs. Peterson's students attended are precursors of the gifted program in high school], and it became clear to me they were not going to teach me anything, but I didn't know what to do," he added.

I listened to the nephew before turning back to Mrs. Paterson. His story was fascinating, and I thought that his lived experience would provide vital comparative



understanding (or longitudinal perspective on where students like Mrs. Paterson's nephew might be five to ten years from now). He continued:

No trigonometry, no calculus - it was so easy, and I didn't have to do anything to pass, not even attend class. I started to get depressed and frustrated. In my third year in high school, my depression started to turn to anger, and I totally stopped going to school. I am still angry. I hated the building. I then found out that I needed to complete high school to be able to go to college. After going back to that high school and complete, I then found out my basic level courses were not good for college. Luckily, George Brown College accepted me to their die and tool making [program] on condition that I will do a pre-required year, which I did with no problem (Ibid).

His story is unmistakably similar to that of his cousin, Trisha. Both landed in Toronto in spring, at age 11, going through grade six. Both had no problems with their education while in Jamaica. Yet, in both cases, their Toronto teachers hesitated to let them through to grade seven at the end of year. They were kept in grade six the following September, even though the teachers probably did not know much about them yet. Unfortunately, their story is too familiar among African-Canadian students, as chronicled by numerous researchers, as shown in other parts of this study (Sium 1987, Dei et. al. 1995, Brathwaite and James (eds.) 1996). The interview with Mrs. Paterson continued:

Q: How is Trisha progressing in her education? Is her experience going to be better than her cousin's?

Mrs. Paterson: About a month ago, her teacher called me, and after explaining that Trishais experiencing problems, and that she is backward (I don't think that is the word she used), and she is working at grade five level, she tried to talk me into agreeing to send Trisha to this special school, vocational school, next year. She said that if she goes on like this, she is going to be frustrated and eventually quit school. If she goes to this special school, she is going to come out of it with some skills.

Q: So what was your answer?

Mrs. Paterson: I didn't know what to say at that time. So I just said, let me think about it, I can't decide now. But in my heart, I wanted to say no. After I finished talking to her, I cried and cried. I didn't know what to do.

The nephew interjected at that moment, "You see, like my mother, she does not know the system. If I were her, I would have said no right away, because there is nothing to think about."

Mrs. Paterson: It wasn't until I talked to this social worker I met when I had

My baby few months ago that I decided to say no, but I haven't phoned her (the teacher) yet. The social worker is white, but she seems to be good and understands black folks. She told me that teachers don't understand black kids, and they don't

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want them succeed, so just say no. She also promised to look for a community centre where my daughter could get help. My sister also said Trisha is only 12, and this teacher wants to send her to special school? She can do a whole lot of progress from now on.

Nephew: They just want to dump her, as they dumped me at East Park View Secondary School. She is not going to go there. I know that she is able to do a lot better than she doing right now.

Q: Do you know what kind of problem Trisha is having?

Mrs. Paterson: I don't know; that is the thing. While I was pregnant and feeling very tired, Trisha came to me crying, "Mrs. Peterson gave me X for this, but I don't know what is wrong" and I couldn't tell her what was wrong. She felt frustrated, and the only thing she could do was cry. I don't think Trisha has a good teacher, all she knows is put an X on it, without bothering to explain what is wrong, and how it should be corrected.

Q: Can you think of one example where the teacher just put an X?

Without saying a word, Mrs. Paterson leaves for the second floor, to Trisha's room. She comes down with a sheet of paper with Trisha's written work. Almost half of the words in two columns for a spelling test were marked X. One of them is "School." At first, both mother and daughter could not figure out what was wrong with it. The next day, Trisha managed to see over the shoulders of Helen who spelled it "school" and got it right. That way Trisha found out that, in fact, some other words were also marked X because she used an upper case letter to start the word. It was a matter of clarity in the instructions. In the meantime, Trisha's confidence was taking a beating.

Q: So what is the most problematic areas of study for Trisha, such as math, writing, or spelling?

You see the teacher didn't explain to me what is wrong, but She called me to ask me if I could agree to send Trisha to a trade school.

Nephew: You see they want dump her like they dumped me to a school where you don't learn anything. Everything was so easy that I did not need to do anything. Maybe they thought I was retarded or stupid.

Mrs. Paterson: You know a teacher call my sister when her daughter (the nephew's sister) was in junior high, and told her that she was retarded. She also (the teacher) suggested that my sister send her to special program. But my sister refused, and now she is doing very well – The nephew interjects, she is doing very well in a collegiate, and not in a special school – I think I am going to say no if they try to send her to a special school.

Q: Can they send her to a special school without your permission?

Mrs. Paterson: I don't know. Do they need my permission to send her? ephew: They didn't ask my mom when they did that to me, and I was too young to know what was happening to me.

I felt like I had to answer since Mrs. Paterson posed a question. I said "According to the law, they need your consent to stream her to a basic level school."

Mrs. Paterson: Then I am going to say no.

Q: From what I am hearing, Trisha is not getting much help from anywhere? Do you think that she will bounce out of these difficulties with her school work?

Mrs. Paterson was speechless for a moment. The sadness and desperation was apparent in her facial expression, but she still put on a brave face:

I hope so. Trisha is very hard working girl you know. She is always in her room working on math more often and English and everything else. She does not do much of anything else, including playing with the neighbours. Sometimes, she gets very frustrated and she cries because she does not know how to do it.

Nephew: Anytime I come here, I usually find Trisha in her room working on math.

Mrs. Paterson: You know, one day, I was cleaning her room after she left for school. I just wanted to see if the drawers were clean and I opened them, moms find a lot, you know. I was surprised to find a diary she kept. She wrote, "She made me stand before the class and read. She talks so fast, I can't understand her. I do not know what I am supposed to do. She embarrassed me and some of the kids laughed at me. She is mean and she does not give me a chance. I felt shy and I came home and cried." You know Trisha is a very shy girl; she has to know you first before she does anything with you.

Q: When did you find this diary?

Mrs. Paterson: Last October (October 1985, on the second month since Trisha had joined Mrs. Peterson's class). That is when Trisha started to be in ...what is her name again? Right from the beginning she started having problems. She did not give her a chance.

Q: How did Trisha's first three months in the Canadian school system go? (Trisha arrived in Canada at the end of March of 1985).

Mrs. Paterson: I think it was okay, certainly much better. She had this teacher ...

(she could not think of her name). I think she was a Philipino, but she was okay. First she thought she should send her to Earlsdale Junior High for grade seven. Later, she decided to keep her in grade -six for one more year. She explained

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to me that it is better if she stays for one more year, and be able to improve and integrate better. That is why I was surprised when Trisha came home from her first day of school this year, I learned her teacher was not the same.

Q: How did you come to select Southview Community School for Trisha?

Mrs. Paterson: The school was so close to us. Besides the neighbour's children went there, and they told us it is very nice school.

Q: Did you go to the school personally to register her, and did you accompany her to the classroom and meet the teacher?

Mrs. Paterson: I went to register her, and wanted to meet the teacher, but the woman who was registering said she will show her classroom so I came back. I asked Trisha about the teacher. Trisha said she is kind of nice and she let her sit with a nice girl, a white girl but very nice, who took her around and showed her the school and helped her a lot. Her current teacher sat her with this girl, an East Indian, who would not even talk to Trisha.

Q: How was Trisha doing in school in Jamaica?

Mrs. Paterson: I was told she was doing very well.

Nephew: You see, they know how to teach you there. Discipline is important and good. If the teacher asks you to do it, you do it. If you can't do it, then the teacher steps in and helps you. That way, you know exactly where you stand, and how to do things better.

Mrs. Paterson: The problem Trisha is having is that she does not know what to do, and no one is telling her what to do to do well. All you see is X everywhere. She does not know how to teach (about the teacher). All she knows is "Trisha has a vision problem, get her eye-glasses." I took her to two eye specialists, and both found out her vision is 20/20, which is perfect. She made a big fuss about the vision thing. Now, all she does is move Trisha around the room, including to the far corners. At some point, she sat next to Helen, and Trisha felt comfortable asking for help, and got a lot of help. Trisha felt a lot easier to ask Helen rather than the teacher. Now she is not sitting with her.

My field notes show that Helen (an African-Canadian girl) is one of the highest achievers in the classroom. On top of that, she has a very easy going personality, open and eager to help and answer questions. Helen is also a capable athlete, and a leader in the gym and playground.

Q: How do you plan to change around the situation for Trisha?

Mrs. Paterson: I really don't know. Maybe I should get a tutor, if I can afford it. Trisha is very young, you know. She has everything to look forward for, and

I think she has a lot of potential. Do you know anyone or a community centre who give extra help? I will be willing to pay.

Nephew: Yes, if you don't help yourself, they can't help you. You know when you are in Canada for the first time, you are shy. You are confused, cultural shock, and maybe when they talk faster, you kind of miss it, and you don't understand them. Then they say you are dumb, retarded, deaf, and with sight problems.

Mrs. Paterson: I seriously considered sending Trisha back to Jamaica at least until grade nine, but my parents are very old, you know. My mom is 80 and she already had two operations for breast cancer and uterus. She really could not take care of Trisha any longer. She had done enough.

Nephew: Trisha has been going backwards, instead of progressing, and she is Trying hard to keep what she has. That is what happens when you are dumped. You lose what you had.

#### A CRY FOR HELP MET BY MANUFACTURED DISABILITIES

What emerged from this painful conversation were multiple stories of inappropriate decisions made which affected the lives of three children (Trisha and two cousins), decisions made on the basis of prejudicial views of Jamaicans. Such decisions, it seems, were made by educators who apparently did not have any clue as to what they were doing.

On more than a coincidental basis, all three children were diagnosed to be slow learners, learning disabled, deaf, and with sight problems. The data in this study also reveals all such claims to be false, and therefore, they were simply cases of misdiagnoses. Paradoxically, the right diagnosis was made by Trisha and her cousin. Trisha hit the nail on the head when she described it to her mother, "She talked so fast, I can't understand her." As a result, "I don't know what I am supposed to do." As a very polite and tactful child, Trisha decided to be quiet, instead of being loud and complaining. In hindsight, the nephew (at 22 years of age) was able to detach himself from what happened to him ten years earlier and what was happening to his cousin now. He offered a reassessment and was now convinced that cultural shock is responsible for what happened to them: "You are shy and confused due to culture shock. When they talk too fast, you miss it, and you stay quiet. Then they say you are dumb, retarded, deaf and with sight problems." What happened to them cannot be expressed more clearly.

That was then, but what was happening during the first decade of the twenty-first century? Have there been any changes in favour of disadvantaged children and parents since the 1980s? Tallying the experiences of racialized groups with whom I had contact seems to indicate that the answer is negative.

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### HISTORY CONTINUES TO REPEAT ITSELF: THE RUSH TO DOCUMENT FALSE DISABILITIES AND RECORD THEM IN THE OSR

There is enough evidence that shows African-Canadian children, both new immigrants and those born in Canada, have long been targeted for special education at the elementary level, and for lower streaming at the high school level. The experience of Trisha, her cousins and of other African-Canadian children has been chronicled in this study, particularly in Chapter Six. The school insisted, with almost a missionary zeal on having them assessed and given some kind of designation that mostly wrongly identified them as learning-challenged. Meanwhile, the evidence also shows that it does not matter whether a student immigrated from the Caribbean, Africa, or elsewhere in the diaspora. Once a *special education designation* is completed, it will be added to the **Ontario Student Record (OSR)**, which will follow the student throughout his/her elementary and secondary education. The OSR will be reviewed and checked by teachers and support staff from time to time, to assess the child's level and the nature of their disability, in some cases, actively looking for disabilities which do not exist. In this way, an inappropriate tag follows the student through his or her elementary and secondary years.

If teachers had been successful in convincing Trisha's mother or Mohamed's (see his story below) parents to go ahead with assessment, create an IEP, and designate them special education students, that designation could have ended up in their OSR. That could have legitimized their manufactured disabilities, and therefore worked to devalue their potential to learn. Yet, schools are not compelled to provide clinical proof attesting that students like Trisha or her cousins have any learning disabilities, which gives them a free hand to do what they please.

Between the 1990s and 2010, I met a lot of parents who came for help to the African Community Health Services office, where I volunteered to serve as the chairperson of the Education Committee. The committee was set up to provide assistance and advice to all parents, but particularly to recent immigrant parents, with respect to the education of their children. Among many others, I met Rahel and Omar's parents. I noted their experiences, because I saw striking resemblances with that of Trisha and her peers who were the subject of this study in the 1980s.

Rahel Tecle migrated from Eritrea to Canada in 1989 at age 13. Her mother is a stay-at-home mom, and her father has a graduate degree in mechanical engineering. He earned his first degree from the former Haile Selassie University in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and his graduate degree from Holland. It took him some time to secure a job in Toronto. The job was not exactly in his field of study, but was in a related area. Initially, they were given a three bedroom apartment in a social housing complex where they stayed for about seven years.

Soon after arrival, they enrolled Rahel in grade eight, and expected her to do well – as she had before coming to Toronto. Ultimately, both parents expected nothing

short of a university education for their eldest daughter and their other two children. Other than going to school whenever they were invited by the school, for Parent-Teacher Interview Nights and other occasions, they pretty much put their trust in the school. Every time that they met with her teachers for Parent-Teacher Interview Night, they were told that Rahel was doing well. However, they experienced a shock during Rahel's last year of high school.

Rahel's parents were told that their daughter could not apply for university because her credits were all completed at the general level, which would only make her eligible to apply for a community college. Angry and confused, Rahel's parents came to the Eritrean Canadian Community Centre for help, and for a possible explanation. When all was said and done, they were told that Rahel could only apply for university by returning to grade 11 and taking advanced (academic) courses, followed by six grade 12 credits. After some negotiations with the authorities, Rahel was allowed to enroll in 6 academic grade 12 courses the following year. Since then, Rahel has graduated from York University during the last half of the 1990s, and currently has a job in her field.

Mohamed Omar was an eight year-old boy enrolled in grade three in the east end of Toronto in 2009. Both of his parents immigrated to Canada from Ethiopia in the early 1980s. Although they are economically comfortable, and they own their home, they have a low level of education. Like most parents, they believed in the school system. They believed that the school system served the best interests of all children, including their son and daughter. Then, a series of exchanges transpired between Mohamed's parents and his teacher that created doubts in their trust in the school's ability to educate their son. Some email exchanges are missing, but there is enough documentation of the situation to show a pattern. Here is one of the initial email communications from Mohamed's teacher to his parents, in her own words verbatim:

Hi there, Zeineb and Mussa,

I hope this e-mail finds you well.

I have just finished completing a few assessments with Mohamed, which are administered to all students at the beginning of the year, and he came out at a low grade two level for spelling and an early to mid-grade one level for reading. I have spoken to Ms. McDonald (both the vice-principal of the school and also the Resource Support teacher) about this and I am quite concerned. We both feel that Resource Support would be a wonderful thing to help boost him and it would also have a positive impact on his grades.

Every time Mohamed sees Ms. McDonald, he keeps asking her when he is going to get the chance to work with her, which is great. I know that you have questions and concerns about the IEP (Individual Education Plan), and since I feel that it is imperative to get him some one on one/one on two support, I was hoping that you would be able to come in next Thursday at 8:30am to meet



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with Ms. McDonald and I, in the hopes that we can better explain the process to you. The IEP is a working document, which means that we can always make changes to it depending on Mohamed's needs and if he eventually does not require Resource withdrawal, then the IEP will no longer be needed. Please let me know if you can make it next Thursday.

Many thanks in advance,  
Lorna  
Lorna Clarke  
Lorna.Clarke@tdsb.on.ca  
Woodbine Avenue Junior Public School

The first reaction of Mohamed's parents was concern for the education of their son, mixed with anger and confusion. They wondered why the school told them two years after the fact that their son needed extra support. And if this was a yearly assessment, like the teacher claimed, why weren't they told last year? Their anger, however, was tempered by the expression of concern for Mohamed's education on the part of the school. So they respond with the help of a graduate student nephew of Mussa.

Hi Lorna,

Thursday at 8:30 and sounds great. We are very concerned about Mohamed's progress, and have recently set up additional tutoring to assist him. We would love to sit down with you and Ms. McDonald to discuss his options. See you next week and have a great Thanksgiving.

Thanks again,  
Zeineb and Mussa

To try to sort out the confusion, Zeineb and Mussa called on Mussa's niece and nephew, Sharifa and Abdu. At the time, Abdu was a graduate student, and Sharifa was working on her undergraduate degree.

Sharifa and Abdu unequivocally opposed the idea of an IEP for Mohamed. They shared how they had also faced pressure to enroll in general level courses during their schooling in Canada, but had successfully resisted and continued to take advanced courses. They also shared stories of what had happened to their friends. Those of their friends who had complied, and accepted a special education designation at the elementary level, and being enrolled in general courses at high school had graduated from high school, but had few choices after that. Some went to college, others just went to work, unhappy about the way in which their education had unfolded.

Abdu started to take a strong interest in Mohamed's education, and offered to tutor him, but remained in total opposition to the IEP designation. That increased Zeineb and Mussa's ambivalence about whether or not to go ahead with the teacher's



proposal. On one hand, they shared a great respect for the school's judgment; on the other, Abdu and Sharifa's comments kept ringing in their ears. With Abdu on the keyboard, they sent the following e-mail:

Hi Lorna,

It was nice seeing you today. Thank you for the timely response. We are glad to hear the support staff and resources are in place to assist Mohamed when he needs it. We have to be honest in saying that our experiences with assessment tests and Resource Support have not been all good. As you know, there are obvious dangers of labeling and other stigmas that can follow children who go through these things. That being said, we would love to discuss the IEP and Resource Support in more detail. If you are available for a meeting next week, we would appreciate meeting with you. It would also be a good opportunity for you to meet my nephew Abdu, who will be working more with Mohamed at home.

Thank you,  
Zeineb and Mussa

Zeineb and Mussa wanted to buy some time to consult further with others on the IEP and its resulting program, Resource Support, supposedly an individualized set-up for Mohamed. They started to speak through Abdul, who brought in words like "labeling." Although nagged by his nephew and niece, they were just not sure who to believe, so they turned to their ethnic community resource experts on education for reassurance. They wanted to be sure about the implications of allowing an IEP classification for their son. In the meantime, the teacher responded right away with reassuring words:

Thanks for your note Zeineb and Mussa.

Glad to hear that Mohamed is still enthusiastic about the extra work! That's great news. I feel confident that the Resource Support will help him to progress. In order for him to receive the Resource Support, an IEP will need to be developed, which will outline his learning style and any extra support he requires at this time. This is a working document, which can be updated and modified at any time and is as I mentioned, required, however you don't need to worry about it – it is in place in order to assist

Mohamed's learning and assessment and you will have the opportunity to give your input into its development. If you have any more questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch. Take care and see you tomorrow.

Lorna,  
Toronto District School Board

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The basic message of this email was significant, in that it offered three assurances: first, that the IEP document is changeable; second, that its only purpose was to serve the best interests of Mohamed; and third, that the IEP and the special education designation for Mohamed would be temporary in nature, and it would only remain in place until Mohamed caught up with the rest of the class. However, what Zeineb and Mussa heard during their consultations with whoever they could talk to in the community contradicted the teacher's representation of the IEP and Resource Support.

As Zeineb and Mussa continued consulting with family and friends, Mohamed was withdrawn from class for about an hour-and-a-half per day, without his parents being consulted or informed. He was being sent to meet with a new teacher in Resource Support, who also happened to be the school's vice-principal. Although the hour-long removals took place under great secrecy and deception, and occurred at least twice, Mohamed's teacher simply described them as a "mistake" when his parents were finally informed about their occurrence. As much as they felt disrespected for this having happened without their permission, they wanted to find out what kinds of activities Mohamed was engaged in with the other children in the program. His description of what took place was that Mrs. McDonald read from a book for them, and they followed by taking turns reading. That was followed by video games, which went on for about half of the time that they spent in the withdrawal room. Of course, for Mohamed, the video game time was the highlight of the day. No wonder he wanted to be with Mrs. McDonald! For Mussa and Zeineb, however, it was puzzling to consider how playing video games might help Mohamed catch up with the rest of the class. They also sent Mrs. Clarke a note indicating their dissatisfaction with Mohamed's removal from the classroom without their consent:

Hello Lorna,

You may not be aware, but during school today Mohamed was picked out by the vice-principal to participate in Resource Support. As you know we decided to wait and speak with the school on Thursday before considering Resource Support for him. We have great apprehensions about the program and are both upset and disappointed that he could be sent to participate without our knowledge or permission. We don't want him to participate until further notice.

Thanks.

Zeineb and Mussa

Zeineb and Mussa did not raise the issue of Mohamed's having been sent to play video games while his peers experienced regular classes. They had reason to question how such video games would help Mohamed, or how they could support his integration into the mainstream classes in the future, but out of politeness, or out of reluctance to appear confrontational in face of the authority of Mohamed's teachers, they did

not. However, the constant reminders from Abdu, and the warnings from community activists started to make sense to Zeineb and Mussa. Mrs. Clarke, for her part, did not offer an apology for sending Mohamed to a withdrawal classroom without the express permission of his parents. Rather, she tried to explain it as something routine, and nothing to worry about.

Hi Zeineb and Mussa

I hope this e-mail finds you and the kids well. Thank you for your note. As I'm sure Mohamed told you, I was at a workshop today when Mrs. McDonald met with him. In her role as Vice Principal, she has been informally meeting with many of the students in all of the grades since she is new to the school, as well as sitting in on many of the classes. As I mentioned to you in my previous e-mail, Mohamed has asked when he would be meeting with Mrs. McDonald, every single day since she explained that she wanted to get to know all of the kids. Since you and I are meeting on Thursday with Mrs. McDonald to discuss Mohamed's progress, she wanted to have the chance to get to know him a little bit, in an informal setting. Please rest assured that this was not a formalized Resource Withdrawal session. Hope this helps to clarify things.

Looking forward to seeing you on Thursday,  
Lorna

Instead of feeling reassured by this note, Zeineb and Mussa felt cheated and disrespected by Mrs. Clarke's explanation. The trusting relationship they had enjoyed with their children's teachers was seriously fractured and damaged. Despite this tension, they proceeded to meet with her and the vice-principal as planned, along with Abdu, and told them that they needed time to think about the question of Resource Support. With a lot of encouragement from Abdu and other family and friends, a couple of days later, Zeineb and Mussa sent an e-mail to Mrs. Clarke to inform her that they preferred to wait until they saw the results of tutoring and encouragement from home before considering withdrawal for Resource Support.

Mrs. Clarke sent one more e-mail before the issue died down, which seems revealing in terms of how the school views its mandate and responsibilities in educating all children:

Hi there,

Sorry it's taken me a while to reply to this email.

Unfortunately I don't have any time to meet this week due to prior commitments and meetings with other parents.

Without an IEP, we will not be able to offer Mohamed any extra Resource Support at school. Since you are uncomfortable with that process at this time, I would suggest that he continues to work on the extra work at home, both

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with you and your nephew and we can meet up in a month or so to discuss his progress. If, at that time, we feel that he is still in need of further small group support at school, we can meet to further discuss the IEP and Resource. At this time, Mohamed is currently reading, writing and spelling below grade level, which is why I feel he should be working with an IEP. Without an IEP, the grades and marks on his progress and Report Cards will reflect that he is behind in these areas.

Lorna

The above e-mail from Mrs. Clarke exposes the school's approach towards parent concerns and its perceptions of its own responsibilities. All of a sudden, Mrs. Clarke's communications took a distant, unfriendly and unhelpful, inaccessible undertone. She issues a warning that Mohamed is operating far below grade level. However, most surprising perhaps is the way in which it abdicates responsibility for educating the child (issuing an ultimatum), saying, "unless you agree with our suggestions we cannot help your child remedy his below grade level achievement." Effectively, the school was saying, "we neglected to tell you for the last two years but Mohamed has been achieving below grade level every year." Clearly, Mohamed's subpar academic performance did not happen overnight.

There are uncanny similarities between the exchanges between Mrs. Clarke and Mohamed's parents in 2009, and those between Mrs. Peterson and Trisha's mother in 1986, as presented in Chapter Six. Trisha's cousins, and dozens of other students cited in this study and their parents all have shared similar experiences with me. Such discriminatory treatment of recent immigrant children is also confirmed by numerous studies published over the past four decades. Clearly teacher-centred education is leaving working-class and particularly marginalized, as well as racialized communities, who are disproportionately represented in the working-class category, with no options but to resist or even fight back, at times, to support the best interests of their children.

Trisha's cousins and thousands of other African-Canadian children were victimized by Ontario's Bill 82 prior to 2000. Ontario Premier Mike Harris's Tory government overhauled Bill 82 and created *The Ontario Student Record Folder, FORM 1A* (see definition of the record under Definitions in Chapter One) in 2000. It also created *Individual Education Plans: Standards for Development, Program Planning, and implementation 2000* (see Definitions in Chapter One for a description of the (IEP) Plan). Under the 2000 guidelines, which are still in force, once a student is identified as "special," as in the case of Mohamed, an Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) is formed. In the case of Mohamed, the IPRC would have consisted of Mrs. Clarke, the resource teacher and Mohamed's parent(s). It would have included neither a psychologist, nor anyone who is trained to assess the child's true level of ability. The basic proceedings in the IPRC would have first included the teacher explaining how Mohamed is performing below grade level and that he was experiencing difficulties. Second, the resource teacher would have explained the

wonderful components that would be included in Mohamed's Individual Education Plan (IEP). The parents would then be asked to endorse Mohamed's identification as an "exceptional student." Finally, a report of that meeting would have been written - most likely by the resource teacher - approved by the principal, and placed in Mohamed's Ontario Student Record (OSR). That IPRC's special label would then follow Mohamed through his elementary and secondary education, always working to undermine his real potential. As part of this special designation, he would be given extra time to complete his assignments, and be allowed to play when he did not feel like doing any work. The message to Mohamed would be loud and clear: that he was less capable than other students, which is why he requires a "special" and obviously easier version of work. Soon, he would start to see himself through the eyes of others, and believe this too.

As a teacher, I try to prepare learning activities that are rigorous and challenging to all students; activities that require the learner to use their time well and to work cooperatively with other students. Many times applied/workplace students come to me and tell me, "Sir, I don't have to do this. I am allowed extra time, too. Check my record (OSR) if you like." In other words, they are allowed to perpetually slack off instead of being encouraged to live up to their full potential. Under the auspices of this arrangement, they can pretty much forget about joining a higher stream in high school, and as a result, are shut out from enrolling in most post-secondary education.

In 2006, a group of African-Canadian mothers (a collective composed of mothers from the Caribbean and African countries) confronted TDSB officials and asked why their kids were being streamed into Special Education, rather than being given the remedial help that they needed. Among these students were a few who were simply in need of English as a Second Language (ESL) support, but were told that Special Education would be a more helpful solution to their learning needs. The *Toronto Star* followed their story (*The Toronto Star*, April 16, 2006: A6).

One of the mothers, Zahra (not her real name), a young mother of three, who had recently immigrated from Somalia, was trying to advocate on behalf of her fifteen year-old son. Although she did not spare any opportunity to thank Canada for opening its doors to allow her to begin a new life she expressed her concern for the lack of English instruction for her children primarily, but also for herself. "I came all the way to Canada so that my children will have a good education and grow up in peace," she says through a translator. She also wanted to learn English so that she could understand the nature of her children's world. In this way, Zahra was courageously forward-looking and fighting hard to safeguard her children's education. For her, failure was not an option. However, the way our school system is set up, and the way students are treated and taught, she and her children were being set up for disillusionment and failure. Zahra was promised when she arrived in Canada that she and her children would get all the education they needed. However, she found a huge gap between what she and her children had been promised by the Immigrant Reception Centre and what she and her children were getting from the school at the time.

It is a well felt experience in Toronto that many Black youth are engaged in gun violence usually in protection of their drug turf. Late in high school, they realize that the ESL or applied level courses they had been locked into usually didn't lead them to meaningful jobs or further education.

There is no doubt that Toronto has some of the best-trained and most caring ESL teachers in the country, though we certainly need more of them. Indeed, the way the program is structured stifles their efforts. First of all, there are not enough English instructors to go around, given the number of new Canadians. Second, a People for Education report shows that school boards misuse the money they are allocated for ESL programs, resulting in a severe shortage in instructional hours (People for Education 2006). In addition, ESL students are stigmatized and isolated much like most other special education students, and their fate is more likely to be placed in lower streams in high school, and consequently, most likely to drop out or fade out, as well.

It is well understood that there is plenty of room for Special Education within our educational system, including for ESL. There are plenty of children with a host of learning disabilities, and shortfalls of one kind or another, who need special programming and care. However, there is no room for streaming in high school, namely essential/locally-developed, applied/workplace, academic, and gifted/enriched levels. Streaming has clearly been used to justify the victimization working class students in general, and African-Canadians and aboriginal peoples in particular. My study and many others cited in this book have shown that abundantly. It will suffice to mention three studies in particular (Curtis et al 1992; Dei et al 1995; Antonelli 2004) to corroborate the findings of my study. Streaming reproduces the class structure of our society and leaves African-Canadian, Aboriginal and other minority students in their permanently marginalized state.

One thing that Zeineb, Mussa, Zahra, and Rahel's parents shared with Trisha's mother, in addition to being black, was that they were all newer immigrants to Canada. While time of immigration to Canada and language shape parents' and students experiences of schooling (Cummins 1981, 2001, and 2003), my focus in this study is mainly on race.

#### OTHER PARENTS' INVOLVEMENT

I sent interview request forms to 26 parents, randomly selected from Europe, Asia, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Those who responded to my request were African- Canadian (three), one hailed from Ecuador, one from El Salvador, two from Greece and a Pakistani, all of whom signed the consent forms they were sent, and returned them back to me. None of the Chinese, Vietnamese, Italians and Anglo-Canadians agreed to be interviewed. If I could venture to speculate why it turned out that way, I would venture to guess that since for most parents from the Caribbean, South America and Africa, education is the responsibility of the "the whole village," when a request like this comes around, parents from these backgrounds will respond

positively. On the other hand, for most parents from Asia and perhaps those from some European countries, education is a shared responsibility between the teacher, the parent and the student. Therefore when a request for participation from someone other than the teacher comes along, it usually gets cold reception. The latter may be true, at least with Chinese parents, if one agrees with Amy Chua (Chua 2011).

My target was to get 12 parents from 12 separate households. Therefore, with eight confirmed participants, I was well short of my target. However, the students themselves were willing to be interviewed, which worked well to shed some light on the character of their home support systems, and the children's own perceptions of the socio-economic and educational status of their parents.

Parents were all asked the same set of questions about their different encounters with the school system. When I asked how often they went to school to ask about their children, all of them said they would only go in response to an invitation to attend the school's Parents' Night, or when there were incidents involving their children. Here is what Donovan's father (African-Canadian from Jamaica) said:

I always go when the school asks us to come. My wife does not want to go. But this one time, last year, the secretary called to say the principal and Donovan's teacher wanted to discuss Donovan's behavior. Donovan was accused of breaking something. I asked him before I went for the meeting. He said 'dad I didn't do it.' I even know who did it but I will not tell them'. I tried to tell them Donovan does not lie, if he said he did not do it then I do not think he did it. You see, Donovan was accused of purposely breaking school property for what a white boy did. (File: PAIN06, p. 20)

Afterwards, I asked Donovan why he did not tell the teacher and the principal who was responsible, to absolve himself. He smiled and said he was not their spy. It simply is not cool to "tell on" what other students do.

Donovan told school staff that he did not do it long before his father was called for the meeting. No one, it seems, believed him. Yet, lucky for Donovan and his father, upon further investigation by the principal, the child who broke the glass confessed. After the facts were known, Donovan's father asked the teacher to apologize to Donovan for a bungled investigation, but she refused. Donovan's father backed down from insisting or from bringing the matter before "higher authorities." Asked why he backed down, he said:

All I wanted for that teacher was to write a note to Donovan and say I am sorry to make a mistake, because everyone makes a mistake. After she refused to apologize I have decided to cool it off, because I am a kind of worried may be teachers will fail Donovan and they kind of will talk among themselves about him (Ibid).

This case spoke volumes about the disconnection between the school system and the students it is supposed to serve. The system tries to bully students into submission



by misusing its authority. Its actions in this case clearly showed Donovan that the system is not interested in hearing what he has to say. In a way, staff solidarity has the effect of disregarding student voices. At the same time, the system proved that it is incapable of meeting some students' educational needs. All of this combined, forced some students to join the collective movement of resistance as an act of solidarity amongst themselves, fueled by collective distrust of the system, and lack of respect for authority. Perhaps that was how the "stop snitching" phenomenon was born, long before the rappers popularized it.

Donovan stuck to his guns and refused to tell who did it; he refused to be a snitch. It was his way of passively resisting by joining the covert student solidarity in resistance through the "stop snitching" phenomenon. It is precisely these kinds of dynamics that push students later in their youth to opt out from working in cooperation with authority figures. In this case, Donovan was failed by all the adults involved in the investigation, including his father. His father failed him, as well, for not sticking up for his son to get appropriate closure to the debacle.

Asked about future educational hopes for their children, six of the eight parents said that they hoped their children would complete university and two hoped that their children would complete college. Further conversation showed that by college, they were speaking the way Americans talk about college - as a junior partner of university that can confer a degree. Bilal's father said:

You can't get anywhere without education. At least I expect him to have university education before he does anything else or before thinking of working and I have no doubt he will. He has very aggressive attitude towards assignments and education in general. He does not want to play before he finishes his work. (File: PAIN06, p. 16)

Aside from what he said about his son being aggressive about assignments and education, his statement is reflective of the sentiment expressed by all of the parents I interviewed. Each one of them made very similar statements, including parents whose children were performing below grade level.

Asked about what they would say if it was suggested to them their son/daughter should attend a Special Education program, all but one parent said "no" outright. Trisha's mother opposed it, but felt hesitant to turn down the teacher's recommendation. After heated opposition from a nephew, however, she said no. Here is what Shrika's mother said:

I would say no, because I see my sister's step-son who joined in special education in grade seven now he is in high school and he is still in it. He has been going from one special class to another and never out of it. When is he going to be over it and come back to a regular classroom? He is having such a terrible time, because on one hand he is trying to deal with it, on the other he is trying to deal with the kids constantly teasing and harassing him over it. They think that he is not normal. So I would not agree to send my child to Special



Education. Besides, there is no reason why she should be in Special Education. She is quite capable. (File: PAIN06, pp. 29-30)

As far as the parents in this group were concerned, the experience of relatives and friends or simply other peoples' children, seems to have taught them a lesson. They have come to view Special Education as a program for those with one form of learning disability or another. As they see it, children are in it for good. From the 1970s through the mid-1980s, parents often thought that Special Education was a remedial program that would help their children catch up with their achievement deficit, and soon rejoin the mainstream classroom again. The parents I interviewed had become aware that a considerable number of children ended up in Special Education programs due to misdiagnosis. Often, when children are diagnosed with learning disabilities, parents and teachers alike find the diagnosis to be too abstract to understand or verify. In this study, I found more blatant cases of conscious or subconscious streaming, in which children were said to have hearing or sight problems. This effectively discredited teachers, because it was easy for parents to see that this was not the case. For Trisha's mother an optometrist proved that she had no eye sight problem, which helped her to question Mrs. Peterson's judgment of Trisha's abilities and to fight for her to remain in the regular classroom.

Not every parent was as confident as Shrika's mother in asserting their parental rights. Like Trisha's mother, Sonya's mother was not sure she could successfully fight the school's decision to send her to a Special Education program:

I am worried because I see 15 or 16 year-olds, I see them at Baycrest School. I am worried they send her there. If she does not improve, I will send her back home to Ecuador. (File: PAIN06, p. 46)

Baycrest was one of Toronto's basic level high schools, where many Special Education students were destined to end up. The student body was also overwhelmingly African-Canadian. Therefore, the fear of African-Canadian parents, more than any other group, that their kids would be misdiagnosed and end up in Special Education classes had a real basis. In fact, it came out during the interview with Donovan's father that he has three grown-up boys in their twenties from a previous marriage, who did not complete high school. Their stories were similar to that of Trisha's cousin (presented above): they were sent to a basic level elementary school and forced to drop out of high school. They could not see where the program of Special Education at elementary and basic level streaming in high school was taking them. Now they drive a taxi like their father; one of them does the night shift with him. Donovan's father expressed high hopes for Donovan and his older sister, in his own words, "because they are born in Canada and they are Canadians." Trisha's mother also thought that being born in Canada makes a difference. She thought that "Helen is doing very well because she is born in Canada.

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Although there is more awareness among youth and parents about the real potential of Special Education programs, the misdiagnosis and inappropriate streaming of youth to lower level programs continues today.

Parents from racial minorities commented on the issue of liking or disliking a teacher. Others commented on the racial background of the teacher having an effect on how effective they were in understanding the needs of their children.

Bilal's father is very happy with the positive attitude of his son in regards to education in general, but he noticed that "Every time he does not like a teacher, his marks go down." He is also very happy that he does not need to help his son on any school work, because he is on top of it.

All three African-Canadian parents thought that perhaps the racial background of the teacher could be a part of the problem. Donovan's father commented on his daughter's teacher, who is from South America. His daughter is in grade eight at one of the more reputable neighbourhood schools.

He is from South America. He is not only a teacher, but he is like a father. He is interested in them and teaches them about everything and about things they do in the street on their way home. Once he phoned to tell me my daughter has a boyfriend. He thought that I should know about it. The other day I phoned to speak with the principal about my daughter and told me if all teachers were like him, the school would be the best in Toronto. (File: PAIN06, p. 21)

Trisha's mother commented that her daughter had been performing at a higher level during the previous school year. Not only was she improving, but she also encountered fewer problems with her school work. She thought that her teacher being a Phillippino had something to do with it.

Using her daughter's experiences, Trisha's mother was referring to the merits of diversity among the staff. In the previous year, she felt that Trisha had benefited immensely by having a teacher from a racialized minority whose own childhood school might have had the same problems meeting her remedial needs when she was new immigrant student that Trisha was experiencing at the time. Not only has study after study shown the positive effects of having a diversified teaching staff, but it has become a widely-accepted fact that the ethno-cultural make-up of a teaching staff should be reflective of its student body for better results among all students. The enabling factor here is that students' lived experiences will more often find their way into the classroom. Only under such circumstances can effective role modeling be provided by the school system for all students. Failing that, students in Trisha's circumstances will continue to be denied the full range of educational opportunities enjoyed by her non-minority peers.

After interviewing first the students, and later their parents, a clear picture emerged with respect to who is worried about getting a proper education and who is not. None of the Asian and European parents were worried that their children would achieve their educational goals, although they understood that they had to continue to struggle

to achieve. By contrast, the African-Canadian and South American parents were very worried that their children would be misdiagnosed, mislabeled and that they would be derailed in their efforts to get the education that they rightfully deserve. Some parents were desperate with anxiety. Each of them probed me for suggestions as to what they should do to help their children. The only exception was Shrika's mother, who was quite capable of helping her daughter with her school work.

#### HIGHLY-MANAGED PARENT INVOLVEMENT AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

During this study, I observed only minimal parent involvement at my host school. Two parent groups were formally recognized at the school: the Parent Council and the Concerned Black Parents Association. Asked about how many times the Parent Council met during the entire academic year, a respondent shared:

Attendance has not been great. Sometimes only the chairperson and two other parents show up. This year, they met about three times. When there are urgent matters I need to discuss with parents, I just call the chairperson and inform her or update her on the matter. So, we have exchanged many phone calls. (File: PAIN06, p. 55)

It was obvious that the Parent Council did not have open-ended involvement in education at the school level. It was merely fulfilling the traditionally prescribed functions assigned to it by the school system. The Council, through its chairperson, participated in officiating major events, like Graduation Night and Parents' Nights (three of them per school year). The single Parent Council meeting I observed had five parents in attendance, all white, consisting of four women and one man. The principal played the role of the CEO, who informed the participants and answered their questions. The chairperson was a very articulate middle-class woman, who shared the stage with the principal and other officiating school board officials. Over the course of the meeting, all the parent participants spoke English without an accent. The rich racial and ethnic diversity of the school's student body was certainly not represented in that meeting.

The other parent group identified at the school was the Concerned Black Parents' Association. I had known its chairperson, Jon Brown, in previous years, when he had invited me to lead a workshop on the topic of, "How Better to Assist your Children in their Education." About 14 parents showed up for that workshop. I thought that this was a great way to create awareness among parents. However, when I conducted my study in 1985, the enthusiasm of this group seemed to have faded.

On November 19, 1985 the principal came over the PA system to make an urgent announcement:

Normally we don't send material to the home on Wednesday. However, this time I will make an exception because there will be a meeting of the Concerned

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Black Parents' Association tomorrow at 7:30 pm in the library. Therefore I have to ask each teacher to send a child to announcement that will go home with the children tonight. (File: FINO05, p. 60)

She sounded frantic and apologetic because the meeting was to take place the next day. By the end of the school day, every black child was seen holding a green sheet (the announcement) that they were to bring home. The topic for the meeting was stated as a "Presentation on how to help your child excel in education." I wanted to attend the meeting, and I knew I would be welcome to do so. I also expected that I would be asked to make a few comments and suggestions. The next day, Thursday, November 20, there were numerous morning announcements after "Oh Canada." Among the top on the list was an item about Earlsdale School (see next chapter for details about this school) Planning Committee's meeting. That particular committee consisted of both parents and teachers, under the chairpersonship of a parent. The announcement of the Concerned Black Parents meeting was also repeated. However, that evening, the meeting was cancelled because too few parents showed up. Only three parents attended, including the chair and the secretary, as well as the community liaison officer and I. There was no chance that parents like Trisha's mother could attend such a meeting, even though they would have liked to. Holding two jobs to make ends meet would preclude her attendance. On the other hand, there was no shortage of members attending the Earlsdale Planning Committee meeting, and it proceeded that evening as planned.

In the 1980s, Toronto was known for its parents/community movement involvement (Dehli 1994). It was arguably the most active decade with respect to parent activism. There were citywide and Toronto Metropolitan-wide workshops, conferences and conventions organized and led by parents. They called for drastic changes in the way that Toronto children were educated. They wanted equity for newcomers, racial minorities, and working class children, among other things. They called for an overhaul of the curriculum to reflect the multicultural composition of the people on the street. However, my study reveals that not much of this activism penetrated through to the school level where I conducted my research.

There was some indication that parent activism was thwarted at Southview Community School through being co-opted by the school administration. Parent activists were pampered by the principal and by teachers. They commanded special respect. The chairs of the Parent Council and of Concerned Black Parents' Association, John Brown, were both on first-name basis with the principal. Between the two of them, they spoke for all parents in the school.

In February of 1986, I ran into a grade three girl rushing out of Earlsdale School at the end of the school day. She seemed familiar, so I asked her if she was Jon Brown's daughter. She said yes. She was a student at Southview Community School the year before. Of course, Jon had every right to send his daughter to Earlsdale School if he wished. However, I could not help but speculate as to whether that new development had affected John's commitment to advocating on behalf of all children.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, I discussed how marginalization of some parents by the school was just as conspicuous as students' marginalization. Based on my observations and interviews, I concluded that race, as well as class were factors in this process. Marginalized parents' voices were mostly ignored; their comments and concerns were not taken seriously by teachers or by the school administration. Thus, their children hardly benefited from their attempts to advocate for them.

Further, I found that armed with stories of relatives and friends' children, marginalized parents did not accept the school's explanation of the purpose of Special Education, or the school's judgment in designating their children as candidates for it. Contrary to the school's explanation of what Special Ed could do to support their children's growth and learning, they saw that children who entered Special Education remained in it for the rest of their school lives.

In the next chapter, I examine the broader role of the school system in a multicultural society. This discussion draws from and compares the voices of two groups of students, one black and the other white.

## CHAPTER 7

### MYTH VS. REALITY IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

On the surface, there is a well-crafted image of public education as a shared public resource which serves all children and youth equally, therefore, equalizing their opportunities later in life. Ideally, schools will transcend race, class, gender, ethnic and other differences, and enable its graduates to achieve desired economic and social mobility, irrespective of their background. However, this study and many other studies that have preceded it show that this is not the case. Studies conducted since mass public education started more than a century ago show that the image of a universally accessible and equitable education system has yet to be achieved (see, for example, the following reports: Ontario Royal Commission on Education 1950; Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario 1968; Ontario Royal Commission on Learning 1994, to mention a few). There may have been honest efforts by politicians, school board officials and activists to move public education closer to its ideals, but there is no evidence that there have been fundamental changes in that direction. On the contrary, my study corroborates the findings of many other studies that warn that the public education system is reproducing inequalities in multiple ways.

#### A SCHOOL WITHIN A SCHOOL: SEPARATE, BUT NOT EQUAL

At times, during my research, I moved around the school whenever I had an opportunity to do so. Accidentally, I discovered that there was a “school within the school,” a separate program occupying a wing of the building. It had a separate entrance, and it felt significantly different from Southview Community School. What made it a school is that, among other things, it had its own name, Earlsdale School. While the two schools shared the same principal, the rest of the administrative and teaching staff was different, as was the way in which the school was organized and administered. The student population was overwhelmingly white.

My investigation continued from there. Among other questions I hoped to have answered, I wanted to find out why there was a need for a separate school. Who are the parents and students? What kind of role do parents play at Earlsdale School? I started looking for answers for these and other questions.

The principal was the first person I approached for answers. I thought that it may provide a good start to get her views on it since she was in charge of both schools. I asked her what need Earlsdale School was fulfilling that Southview Community School could not:

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I don't know that it is fulfilling any specific need, but I think it is fulfilling the needs of those parents. Some want all their siblings together. Others want to have a say in the curriculum, such as reading material. They want a much more family-focused atmosphere. They don't want different atmosphere than the one at home. They want close relationship between brothers and sisters, and they want have a definite say in the curriculum their children are taking. They have Thanks Giving dinners together with teachers. They have a curriculum committee of parents and teachers, etc. (File: PAIN06, p. 55)

I wondered, is that not what every parent wants? Wouldn't most parents want to bring a bit of home to school and to have a say in the curriculum? Wouldn't most parents want a close relationship with their children's teachers, as well as wanting their children to be together in the same school? The principal was referring to the triangular trust that should be developed between all parents, teachers, and students. However, as I would learn when I continued my inquiries, at this school, this triangular relationship was made available only to middle-class families.

The case of the school within a school phenomenon brings to life the issue of differential treatment of parents and students by the school system based on race and class. As I discussed in the previous chapter, marginalized parents are stonewalled when they try to advocate for their children.

I also asked Mrs. Peterson for a classroom teacher's perspective on the school within the school:

We have a separate school within this school called Earlsdale School because some parents demanded special privileges for their children, and they had to have a separate school to get what they wanted. I have seen this neighbourhood change a number of times. First it was WASP, then turned Jewish. In those days, every kid went to university from the neighbourhood high school. What used to be middle-class homes were turned to multiple-dwelling houses. The Italians and later Greeks, and eventually the Portuguese moved in. Now it is black and predominantly Jamaican. Some years back, middle-income families started renovating some homes, and started moving in, and they started demanding special status. (File: FINO05, p. 109)

If Mrs. Peterson's opinion of Earlsdale School was representative of Southview Community School teachers, there was quite a bit of resentment towards the separate school. Indeed, her perception, the existence of Earlsdale School reinforced the suspicion that there was a double-standard within the same school.

Mrs. Peterson observed that the children at Earlsdale are well-informed before they start school. She told me that both children and parents "know what to ask and they know how to get it." She goes on:

In my time, you did not have a choice; you went to the school closer to you, and if you did not like it, you went to a private school and paid a fortune for it. Now, the school is trying to satisfy everyone. Some parents felt that their



children will have a bad influence if they sit next to working-class children. Most of the children come from outside the neighbourhood. In Earlsdale, parent participation is encouraged, and they are always in the classroom - mostly mothers. Teachers, students and parents are on first-name basis, but teachers are afraid to write negative comments when they need to... No one from there goes to enrichment because they are all enriched. (Ibid, p. 110)

After our conversation in the staff room, during her coffee break, Mrs. Peterson offered to take me for a tour of Earlsdale School. I gladly accepted. Unfortunately, we found empty classrooms, because the whole school was on a field trip. However, I was very much interested in looking at the classrooms. The rooms were very neat, well-organized and well-resourced. The setting was open-concept classrooms, just like at Southview Community School, and that is why Mrs. Peterson and I were able to get access to their classrooms. However, the setting is the only thing the two schools had in common.

Each household at Earlsdale School had a pouch in the classroom for individual messages. Most classrooms had fewer than 28 pouches, indicating smaller class sizes than the board prescribed size of 28 students per classroom. The grade levels being taught at Earlsdale School at the time were kindergarten to grade three, and Earlsdale was scheduled to grow by one more grade every year to grade six, at which time it was slated to occupy a whole wing of the building that housed both schools.

Mrs. Peterson thought that fragmenting the school system in this way would have detrimental effects. Had these kinds of parents been part of one big, integrated school system, she felt, there would be an invigorating effect for all children.

The last person to whom I turned for comments on the separate school within the school was the community liaison officer. In those days, school boards in Metropolitan Toronto had a support staff position with that title, to assist parents and communities in communicating with the schools more effectively, including attending to the provision of translators for parents, if needed. Usually, the officer was hired from the most dominant ethnocultural or racial group in the school. Although the most dominant racial group at Southview Community School was African-Canadian (almost all from the Caribbean), the officer at the time was white. Later, during the Mike Harris years, the community liaison officer position was eliminated through budget cuts. Asked about the separate school idea, the Southview Community School officer simply said, "These are the kind of parents who don't need my services" (File: FINO05, p. 111).

Mrs. Peterson was correct when she said all the kids at Earlsdale School are from affluent households, and that such exceptional treatment is simply a characteristic of schools serving affluent neighbourhoods. As a teacher who has been involved in inter-school activities, and who had taught in various schools, I am privy to know that elementary schools in affluent neighbourhoods in Toronto tend not to stratify children into Special Education, regular classroom and enriched groups, which are forerunners of a full-blown and clearly identified streaming into basic, general,



academic, enriched and gifted levels at high school. Again, high schools serving affluent communities in Toronto do not have the various streams others have. They offer mostly academic stream programs.

A bigger proportion of working-class children, and especially students from African-Canadian communities, are being targeted for Special Education and lower streams, for the simple reason that they are performing below grade level. A Special Education designation should only come with foolproof, identifiable learning disabilities, and not because students are performing below grade level. In that case, a Special Education designation is totally inappropriate. That is, it should be assigned only if there is an identifiable lack of potential to learn, and not just a lack of achievement.

Mohamed has no identifiable learning disabilities, but he may not have been paying much attention to his teacher or to his parents at home when they ask him to do his homework. In a way, both his teachers and his parents have neglected to teach him responsibility, which may have cultivated his lack of attention for his studies both at school and within the home. They let his poor work habits get out of control for two years. Consequently, his teacher declared him to be performing below grade level. What Mohamed needs to do is to relearn how to pay close attention to what his teachers and his parents expect him to do, and do it. Most of all, what he needs is remedial support to help him catch up with the rest of his classmates, and a support team to continue fending off the school's recommendations for Special Education and the stigma that accompanies it. It also makes sense that the remedial help should come without isolating him from his peers during the school day.

In reality, a Special Education designation is permanent. It is unlikely for children to bounce back from it, or to rejoin the mainstream classroom again, unless it is Special Education of the high-achievers variety, identified as the *gifted program*. The road from a Special Education designation at the elementary level usually leads to lower streams in high school, and a clear ineligibility for subsequent post-secondary studies. Not many people will mention an example of a child who went through Special Education programming, only to rejoin the mainstream at a later time. Indeed, this designation has condemned countless African-Canadian and working-class students to dead-end courses by targeting them for lower school performance expectations, and thus for discriminatory treatment (Curtis et al 1992).

The ways in which schools explain a Special Education designation to working-class and racial minority parents of intellectually capable children is erroneous and misleading. It sells it as temporary and in the child's best interest by making it appear as though it will offer the child the extra help needed until it is no longer needed. It is presented as temporary remedial help that will not cost the child ridicule from peers and low expectations from future teachers. Here are two diagrams I have designed to conceptualize how a Special Education designation is explained to parents and

guardians versus its actual results on marginalized students, as shown in diagrams 8.1 and 8.2 below:

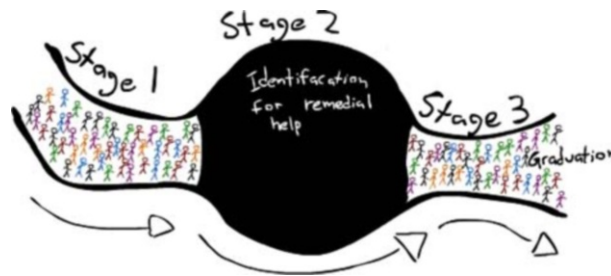


Diagram 8.1 The way the school explains streaming and consenting parents come to understand it.

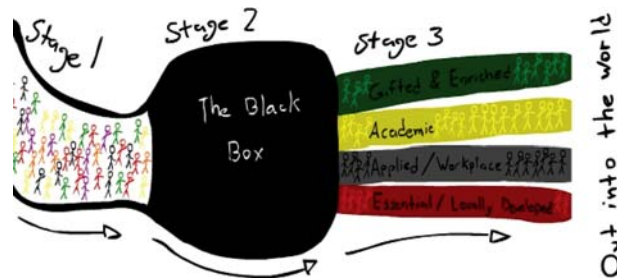


Diagram 8.2 Different stream courses different results, but not necessarily based on potential.

Diagram 8.1 looks and acts like a water purification turbine. The way a water-turbine works is that water, with all its impurities, flows into the turbine from the left end, undergoes purification in the mid-section, and flows out clean from the right end. Likewise, children enter kindergarten (or early education) with possible strengths and weaknesses unknown to educators, represented by *Stage 1* on the diagram. Their weaknesses and failures are assessed and identified for remedial help in the mid-section, *Stage 2*, which could cover kindergarten through grade eight. They emerge from this mid-section, ready to face high school, with their learning potential and self-esteem intact. The multi-colours among the children in *Stage 3* represent the different streams they graduate from, again based strictly on their potential and not due to any possible misdiagnosis or differential treatment. They emerge from high school ready to face the world and all of its various opportunities.

The real picture and consequences of the role of “special help” or “resource support” towards building an IEP are better represented by an Afro-pick shaped diagram (Diagram 8.2). Indeed, children enter kindergarten with different abilities and levels of enthusiasm, as shown on *stage 1* in the pick. As they enter *stage 2*, which could represent a black box, they are subjected to a host of assessment and evaluation processes. These programs have taken different names at different times and grade levels. In 1986, it was presented to Trisha’s mother as “a special vocational school” by Mrs. Peterson, as explained in Chapter Six. In 2009, it was presented as an IEP (Individual Education Plan) to Mohamed’s parents. The only difference was that in the case of Trisha, “at least she will learn some skills appropriate to her abilities otherwise she will be frustrated and eventually quit school,” as Mrs. Peterson put it. In the case of Mohamed, “he will get all the help he will need to succeed.” That all depends on the grade level during which they are identified as requiring enrollment in a lower stream. In the case of higher grades (like Trisha, who was in grade six), learning skills take a prominent role. In the case of lower grades (as in Mohamed, who was in grade three), the help that is identified takes an urgent attention. In both cases, the end result is the same: their special treatment will, ironically, lead to lower streams and only further impair their self-confidence, learning potential, and likelihood to complete secondary school.

The transition from the middle part of the picture to *Stage 3* is radically different from the expectations of many parents, like those of Rahel. Children emerge into *Stage 3*, represented by clearly colour-coded streams. They are made to join distinct streams with clearly-defined curriculum and learning outcomes, supported by a defined teaching strategy.

Studies show that streaming has always existed in Ontario – in one form or another – since the public education system was established. However, it took a clearer shape in the aftermath of the publication of the Hall-Denis report. What is known today as the *essential/locally-developed* stream was labeled Levels 1, 2 and 3 in the post-Hall-Dennis Report era. These three levels were meant for kids identified as having various forms of learning disabilities, ranging from mental, psychological, behavioral or a combination of some or all of these. In some cases, their learning disabilities are easily identifiable. Historically, there have been significant numbers of Black, Aboriginal and working-class children, wrongly identified as possessing one or more learning difficulties. When this occurs, these students are inappropriately slotted into Levels 2 and 3 by the school system. No properly-trained educator would think Trisha or her cousin should have been slotted into Level 3, but her cousin was, and if Mrs. Peterson had gotten her way, Trisha might have been, too. One can imagine how this might have affected Trisha’s future from Trisha’s cousin’s insightful retrospective analysis of how he got cheated out of appropriate education. In my estimation, he possessed no less than a Level 5 or 6 learning capacity (see Chapter Six for a detailed analysis of his case).

The current *applied/workplace* stream is identified as Level 4. This stream was meant to be for children who possess less than adequate academic potential, but tend

to excel in practical and skill-oriented programs. Level 4 curriculum includes a lot of technical options, such as food preparation, hair styling, auto repair, electricity, carpentry, etc. High school graduates from Level 4 can enroll in college to pursue what they started in high school, or begin apprenticeships, but they are not eligible to apply for university. Graduates from Levels 5 and 6, on the other hand, features course and curriculum content that prepares and pre-qualifies them to apply for a university education. While Level 5 represents children who are academically competent enough attend university, Level 6 students consists of those identified as gifted. Level 5 has been renamed *academic* stream and Level 6 has expanded to include the *gifted/enriched* stream. Almost all students who are enrolled in the *gifted/enriched* stream go to university after high school.

Soon after the Radwanski report was published, with a set of recommendations for the David Peterson government, the Ontario Liberal government tinkered with some reforms in education. First off, the numbered levels were given names. Levels 1-3 were renamed *Basic* level, Level 4 became *general*, Level 5 became *advanced* stream and Level 6 was renamed *gifted*. The same legislation also abolished streaming in grade nine. The Peterson government was convinced the critics of streaming at the time that grade nine was too early to separate students into streams, primarily because it would prematurely impose upon students choices that they could better make in grade ten, when they are ostensibly more mature and better able to make informed choices as to which stream fits them best.

The Harris-Eves regime (1995 to 2002) did not need any special report to justify its turning-the-clock-back approach. It reinstated streaming in grade nine and engaged in a radical reorganization of education with the sole purpose of cutting back funding - thereby eliminating all the gains made towards more equitable and more inclusive education. It also renamed the streams, as mentioned above (Kerr 2005).

Although the McGuinty government has received numerous reports echoing findings of the highest high school dropout rates among black and Aboriginal students in particular, and among working-class students in general, no reforms have been initiated to deal with the inequities in education. Nor did the McGuinty Liberal government seriously entertain the inclusive legislation or corrective strategies explored by the Bob Rae's New Democratic Party government a decade earlier. Consequently, school boards have been able to expand their *enriched programs* at the expense of making meaningful changes to curriculum and teaching that would help working-class and marginalized students succeed.

Over the last ten years, the gifted program has precipitously mushroomed into a language of *enriched schools*, *schools within schools*, or *programs within schools*. Students have to pass high-end entrance tests in order to enter into enriched schools or programs. An example of one of these high-end Toronto schools is the Etobicoke School of the Arts. Examples of "schools within a schools" in Toronto include Marc Garneau School of Technology, which has been set up within a pre-existing old school, Overlea Secondary School, or Earlsdale Public School a school tucked within Southview Community School. In addition, there is a long list of specialty

programs within TDSB schools. For example, Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute established a *Math, Sciences and Technology (Mast)* program to replace the outgoing gifted program. Since the program was established at Danforth around 2001, my Mast classes have mostly consisted of white and students of Asian origin. This is not surprising, considering that high-end schools and programs were created to respond mainly to middle-class parents and their demands for privileged treatment. In this way, schools in mixed-income neighbourhoods have been able to entice and keep middle-class students within their own school communities, and beyond.

Marginalization of students from certain backgrounds is corroborated by a data analysis of the four grade ten classes that I taught during the 2010/2011 academic year; two of them applied, and two of them enriched classes. For the record, students have to pass an entrance test to join the enriched stream.

The racial/ethnic/gender mix of the two enriched classes was less diverse compared to the population of the school. Out of 39 enriched students in total only seven of them were girls; a mere 3%. The female student population in the school overall was roughly 24%, probably because the school has a history of being a technical school, but even by the standard of the school's gender mix, 3% in my enriched class is too low. Thirty percent of the enriched combined classes were South Asian (originally from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and at times Nepal), 25% white, 23% East Asian, mostly of Chinese ancestry, 2% were Black and 7% are from racially-mixed parents. There were no Aboriginal students or students of South American origin in these classes. Parents' Night conversation revealed that all but one of the mixed couples were of mixed white and Chinese background. The remaining mixed-race couple was a white father and a Japanese mother.

By contrast, my combined applied classes had 45 students in them. Twenty-eight percent were girls, 35% Black, 32% white, 8% East Asian, 6% Aboriginal, 8% mixed heritage, 5% South Asian and 6% from South America. Most of these students from mixed parents have one parent Black.

One will notice here that class-size was larger in my applied classes. I had taught the same course combinations for three years prior, and the racial, ethnic, and gender mix of each of these classes had been more or less the same every year.

I have noticed the above described racial/ethnic mix in the different streams throughout my teaching career in four different Toronto schools. I have heard from researchers the analysis that the school system did not create the socio-economic class system in our society. That may well be true, but it certainly is reproducing the old class structure in this society, and therefore its role has been to hinder social and economic justice, instead of facilitating it.

I must point out that I have nothing but respect and admiration for those students in my enriched classes. I also believe that they have earned everything they have been getting. This analysis is about bringing out the fact that too often, the lower stream students are there for the wrong reasons, and that they are not getting the same educational opportunities to succeed and to excel as some of their marginalized peers.

As I have stated above, it may not be a horrible idea to group children together for the purpose of providing them with appropriate teaching material, as well as using differentiated teaching strategies for remedial purposes. This could be a temporary arrangement with a stringent time limit to help bring those students lagging behind in their studies to the same level as the rest of the class. The fact remains that working-class children are being identified for lower streams, to which they become permanently relegated, thereby excluding them from educational opportunities that can lead to university and to more secure financial futures. This happens inordinately to student of African-Canadian backgrounds. My research has made it painfully clear to me that African-Canadians specifically are pursued with almost a missionary zeal by the school system for inappropriate Special Education designations. And this has the insidious result of channeling them into lower streams and dead-end courses in high school. As a teacher, I see it every day and I am puzzled as to why no government acts to eliminate this systemic discrimination against African-Canadian students. I meet many of these students in the school where I am employed, through my *applied/workplace* courses. I rarely see them in my academic classes and see them even less frequently in my enriched classes, as described earlier in this chapter. Every year, I watch for what my class enrollments will bring; some years, there is not a single African-Canadian student among the enriched classes, and when there is, it is rarely more than one token student. Is it any wonder that 40% of African-Canadian students fade out, or get fed up and decide to drop out, when 64% of them find themselves in lower streams, which include *essential/locally developed*, *GLE*, and *applied/workplace* courses, and not other options? As presented in Chapter Seven, this phenomenon has been aptly articulated by Jacqueline, one of the grade 13 student participants in this study.

The inherent learning inequities created through these differentiations is captured in the language used to describe students. Students who are identified as *gifted/enriched* are tagged with positive terms like “smart,” while others who find themselves in the *applied/workplace*, or even worse, in *essential* and *GLE*, are tagged with words like “dumb, retarded, slow” etc., as Trisha’s cousin cleverly presented it. It certainly is a self-esteem booster for the *gifted/enriched* and, perhaps to a lesser degree the *academic*, to be labeled as such; inversely, such learning designations as *applied/workplace* or *essential/locally-developed* become self-esteem slayers for students in the lower streams.

Since the mid-1990s, the basic level stream in secondary school has been renamed ‘essential,’ the general level has been renamed ‘applied’ in grades nine and ten, and ‘workplace’ in grades 11 and 12. These courses prepare students mostly for the entry-level job market. Students taking these courses are not expected to continue their formal education beyond high school. The academic level under the old system remains academic, and what used to be a gifted program has been complimented by the addition of some enriched programs - some based in the arts and drama, others in math and science, and still others in technology. However, the function of these new streams is essentially the same as that of their precursors; they are merely cloaked in



new names. Each respective Ontario government that has come into power over the years has put its own ostensibly unique stamp on education. However, the changes they have made have been largely superficial; at the practical and organizational levels, things have essentially remained the same.

The fact is that in affluent neighbourhoods, most of these categories are deemed irrelevant and unnecessary. Parents and school administrators in such neighbourhoods take pride in having only one stream of students - regular classes for all students at the elementary levels, and all academic classes at high school. In reality, though, like Mrs. Peterson said, they are all enriched. At the same time, affluent parents have a lot of say in how their children are educated, and they are ready to open their wallets when schools hint that they are in need of things that the school board failed to provide. In the mid-1980s, affluent neighbourhood schools had fax machines, and other modern conveniences funded by parent councils, long before they became standard items in any school. In 2011, schools in affluent neighbourhoods are getting smart boards, funded by Parent Councils, and other devices that afford students a technological “head start” in the learning process. And why not? They have been getting private school treatment within the public school system. They have already saved a lot of money.

Special Education categorizations and streaming are acts that disproportionately disadvantage working-class neighbourhoods. This raises a serious question about whether or not the perceived deficits and overachievements in the student body, which become the basis of negative streaming in working-class neighbourhood schools have become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I would argue that a case such as Earlsdale School – located within Southview Community School - is a form of public school privatization. The school has all the features of a private school, within the public system. The idea of privatizing public education came in the name of meeting the individual needs of every child, based on the Hall-Dennis Report’s idea of child-centred education. Such forms of privatization have intensified since the 1980s. Today, there are a lot more special schools and programs, both at the elementary and high school levels. Such schools usually boast high enrollment, i.e. children write entrance tests to get in, and they have to score highly to be admitted. Many of the specialty programs are offered within stand-alone schools, like Earlsdale School or Etobicoke School of the Arts. Others are separate programs for tested children or youth within schools. Currently, the TDSB is about to establish four more elementary specialty schools. The current Director of Education, Chris Spence, has said that there will not be an intake test for the planned schools so that working class children can access them. However, many educators argue that unless these new schools are designated for working-class and excluded racial minorities, like the Africentric Alternative School, the First Nations School of Toronto, and the Triangle Program for gays, lesbians and bisexuals, they will end up being for affluent children. This is due to the fact that marginalized communities - like First Nations and African-Canadian - lack the information and time to shop around for schools for their children. Their ability to transport their

children to an out-of-district school may also be very limited. In other words, the location of these proposed new schools will be very important in determining which communities are served by them. If they are to be put in the service of regularly excluded children, they should be located in economically-depressed areas, and tailored specifically for marginalized children, much in the same way that the above-mentioned three specialty schools are.

It is clear that high-end special schools, like Earl Haig Public School, schools within schools, like Earlsdale School, and programs like the enriched program at Southview Community School are doing what all schools without variation should be doing, because clearly that is what all parents want and all students need. Under the principles of equity, all children are entitled equitable education. Such schools have successfully brought the home into the school and vice versa.

However, the provision of differentiated educational services has polarized the results of our educational system, resulting in the creation of under-educated groups of students, who are destined to join the ranks of the underclass, and groups of students who are on their way to inherit middle-class values and privileges. This dichotomy has generally created two types of schools and programs, those that can teach, and those that do a bit of teaching, but mostly track students into streams. What is more, the tracking is done without clearly identified potential measuring-tools, leading to a lot of misdiagnosis and erroneous assessment of student potential.

#### DISTRIBUTION OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT

Although its student body was predominantly black, Southview Community School was as culturally diverse as it could be. All continents were represented in Mrs. Peterson's class.

Students' levels of performance within her classroom were as diverse as their backgrounds. Seven out of Mrs. Peterson's 30 students were regularly attending enrichment programs. This group of students was entirely white and Asian. Nine students in the class were achieving below grade level; seven of these were African-Canadians. The two non-African Canadian students in this group were recent immigrants from South America, who simply had not had enough exposure to English to master what was being taught in the class. This was why they were underachieving. Five of the seven African-Canadian students achieving below grade level were born in Canada. Therefore, their achievement was not due to a lack of standard Canadian English. The question is: Why was there such a big gap between the performance of African-Canadian children and others in Mrs. Peterson's classroom?

My observations showed a systemic bias against African-Canadian children, as illustrated in Chapter Four. On the surface, of course, race is never mentioned. Instead, living in public housing and therefore being poor; being from single-parent households; and not having a parent who could not help them with their school work were all repeated as causes for their the low performance of African-Canadian



students. I frequently accompanied Mrs. Peterson during her coffee breaks in the staff room, where we had conversations on various issues, including parents' ability to assist their children with school work. Mrs. Peterson also expected me to brief her, from time to time, on the progress of my study - including reporting to her if there were concerns I discovered during my interviews with parents that she should know about. I shared some of those matters without divulging sensitive issues or identities.

I also realized that Mrs. Peterson was privy to privileged information about the children. Children are vulnerable by virtue of their innocent and tender age, and they tend to be open books to people they believe they can trust. Their teachers are certainly people they would like to trust. Mrs. Peterson knew whose fathers had walked out on them, leaving them financially vulnerable and less-supported. She knew all the families headed by single mothers; the parents who could help their children with their school work, and those who could not. My research indicated that these problems were experienced mostly by African-Canadian students. They were social problems that were used against them.

For example, no urgency was shown to help Randy overcome his achievement deficit. Although formally, he was supposed to be in grade five, Randy was operating at a grade two level in math, grade three level in spelling, and a grade four level in other areas. Every time Mrs. Peterson taught a lesson to the grade fives, Randy was given a grade two textbook to do desk work on his own, totally removing him from interaction with his teacher and his classmates. Referring to his predicament, Mrs. Peterson said, "His father left them recently. His mother has her hands quite full with a lot of responsibilities raising three children on her own. She is also on welfare." Randy did not have any school-identified learning disabilities. On the contrary, he was quite affable and diplomatic, and he seemed very bright with no sign of behavioural concerns. It seems that his home situation was used as a rationale to give up on him. Although he was obedient, and tried to complete the work he was assigned, he did not get the much-needed guidance and tutoring that would have allowed him to perform at grade level.

Other students, like Akil, Peter, and Daniel have very similar stories to Randy's. They were all African-Canadian boys operating below grade five level, with similar home situations and were similarly disengaged with their learning. Unlike Trisha and Shrika, they were all born in Toronto. In my heart, I referred to them as "the four lost black boys." The system had totally lost them, in that their education was spiraling downwards, seemingly, without end. From time to time, as the performance of a student was being discussed with Mrs. Peterson, family-related issues were brought up repeatedly. For example, when Peter's lack of engagement was being discussed, Mrs. Peterson said:

He is the youngest of four children. I taught his oldest brother and sister, both were part of a group with behavioural problems. His sister was later reintegrated into the mainstream. Now he is just about the same. Anything negative you say to him, he will scream back racism, and it is not him who is

the source. His mother is an interesting character. She can quote you from the Bible at the same time accuse you of racism. One time, she came rushing from home to scream racism at a teacher and then she found out that racist teacher was black. The father lives few blocks away from them. (File: PAIN06, p. 107)

Later I found out from Peter that both of his brothers were in a Special Education program. Peter was a normal child who could excel in normal circumstances. However, his school circumstances were anything but normal. Mrs. Peterson's perception of him was totally biased and lacked trust. One thing she did not take into account was the possibility that Peter and his siblings were acting out as a way of protesting their treatment by the schools. Nor did she take into account that it was also a strategy of survival and maintaining their dignity. Mrs. Peterson's comments illustrate the push to denigrate students and parents who resist.

There was also evidence that the abilities of African-Canadian parents to assist their children with their school work, and these parents' ability to provide for their children was under constant scrutiny. For example, I was discussing Trisha's achievement deficit and its causes during one of our staff room conversations. Mrs. Peterson wanted a confirmation from me that Trisha and her family lived in public housing, which I could not deny. Her assessment was:

Trisha came to Canada over a year ago. She is a bit behind. It is sad, but she will always be behind. Her mother told me she is too busy to help her, but I have the feeling she cannot help her. (File: PAIN06, p. 109)

It was also my assessment that Trisha's mother was not able to help her with her school work. However, this raises the question: who is charged with the provision of education, a parent or the school? If parents cannot help - and there are many who cannot or will not help - does it mean the child is to be denied an education? My assumption is that the school is responsible to meet all the educational needs of the child, with or without parents supplementing its efforts. From this perspective, one would expect that the school would provide the level of attention needed by each child, so that those who needed more attention to succeed would get it. The privileged treatment that middle-class students get suggests that the board's resources are not being deployed where they are needed the most.

Back to Trisha: I raised the issue of how sending her to Special Education could help her, knowing full well that special education is meant to be for those with learning disabilities who will remain in Special Education. In my view, Trisha did not seem to be a candidate for that. Mrs. Peterson repeated to me exactly what she had told Trisha's mother when she suggested to her that Trisha should go for Special Education. She felt that "rather than continue to underachieve and get frustrated, she will at least learn some skills in Special Education."

Contrary to the condescending attitude towards single mothers and their children, that she faces, Trisha's mother is a proud single mother who does not want anyone to feel sorry for her or to pity her position as a sole caregiver. Her

home was impeccably clean and well-furnished when I visited her. The front yard was well-maintained, with thriving growth - indeed, the best in that publicly-owned town homes complex. She was capable of providing for her children as much as any parent, in spite of working two jobs to make ends meet. She was appreciative of Canada for giving her the opportunity to work. She also believed that her daughter was capable of excelling in her school work if only she was taught well.

One of the possible explanations thrown around routinely by school board officials and administrators to explain the high drop-out rates among African-Canadian youth was the fact that they come mostly from female-dominated households. The assumption here is that two-parent homes are more supportive. Who could deny that having two parents to support a family instead of one might be better? However, determining to what degree the difference affects children's school achievement is another matter, and may reflect white, middle-class biases.

No doubt thousands of youth drop out of school every year. The question is: What are the reasons and, is dropping out avoidable? What circumstances lead them to drop out? Are the causes for dropping out different among white and Black youth, for example?

In the early 1990s, I had the opportunity to teach 26 predominantly white drop-backs. They ranged in age from 17 to 24. They had been forced to drop out of school because the very homes that were supposed to tend to their emotional, physical and educational needs had failed to do so. They were subjected to sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse at the hands of (mostly) their own parents. Many of them came from rural or small town Ontario, and most of the time, the culprits were fathers in the adoptive home. To escape the abuse they fled to downtown Toronto, far from the situation, where they were received by pimps and drug kings to derail their lives even further. Far too few of them were healthily re-engaged by community and charitable organizations and given the opportunity to go back to school. Those were the 26 I taught over a two-year period of time.

Indeed, listening to their stories was heart-wrenching, and alerted me to the alarming cruelty to which children are subjected in their own homes. However, none of their multiple problems originated in the schools they attended. It was largely failings within the home and the failure of child protection agencies that limited their abilities to continue in school. By contrast, the high drop-out rate of African-Canadian students is largely attributable to the school system, specifically to the inferior treatment it gives them. A school system that has categorized, channeled and relegated them to mostly dead-end lower level streams. By contrast, again, their home environments were mostly warm, nurturing, caring and well-supported and enriched by extended families (Sium 1987; Dei et al 1997).

The possible explanation for the lack of encouragement and non-provision of adequate remedial help for African-Canadian children is complex and hard to pinpoint. The purportedly deleterious effects of single parenthood, residing in public housing, and behaviour problems were heard a lot as reasons for achievement

deficit. But then there was the case of Helen. Helen's father was a teacher, and her mother worked for the Ontario government. Thus, the family is solidly middle-class by Canadian standards. Helen was one of the top achievers in the classroom, who helped Trisha and anyone else who needed it, particularly with spelling. She was the ultimate source of current events during News Time. She informed the class on the work of *Medicins Sans Frontieres* and other charitable organizations. Most of the time, she scored perfectly on spelling, without much effort. Her teacher even complimented her for coming from a family that appreciates the "classics." Yet she was never tapped by Mrs. Peterson to take the test for enrichment, nor was she added later, without a test as some students were. Rather, Phuong and Carla were added to the enrichment list. Were there any reasons for this other than racial bias?

I discussed the permanent nature of being streamed into a Special Education program with the principal. Most parents understand Special Education to be a temporary program in which their children will get intensive corrective help so that they can be better integrated into the mainstream classroom. Basically, they see it as remedial help. I asked the principal why children are sent to Special Education programs without informing parents that it is a permanent streaming which will ultimately lead to a basic streaming in high school. She said:

You know, we try our very best to explain the implications to them. They are new to the country and the children face some cultural shock to overcome along with learning a new language and new system. When appropriate then we will have a special class for them. With Bill 82 now we have to identify (IPRC) and place and I hope we are open with parents, because yes it is a special class, with specialists in special education and special material with no guarantee with mainstreaming out of it. It is a developmental program with very low IQ. So yes it is very hard to come out of that stream. (File: PAIN06, p. 53)

The principal was a bit taken aback when I raised the fact that there is no fool-proof, culturally bias-free IQ test in existence. While she admitted that there could be some children who are subjected to misdiagnosis and wrongly sent to Special Education programs, she hoped that this was not widespread.

I also observed how disengagement among students was treated. Race and class seemed to be at play in relation to distraction and disengagement in class and whether or not corrective measures were taken. There were incidents that took place repeatedly over the school year that displayed a pattern.

Donovan (African-Canadian, of Jamaican heritage), Gus (Greek), Paul (Hungarian), and Phillip (English, Irish and other Northern European mixed-heritage) were fun-loving and good friends. They were all in grade six and performing at grade level. Although they were barely getting by in their studies, they were quite satisfied with themselves. They were all polite and incredibly diplomatic in how they dealt with their teacher and other students. Their main form of resistance was telling jokes, sometimes about each other, sometimes about other classmates. While all this was going on, Gus did his work - though just enough to get a passing mark.

## CHAPTER 7

Donovan, Paul and Phillip, however, usually would try to get away with as much incomplete work as possible. Mrs. Peterson knew exactly why the three of them did not complete their work - their fooling around was on her radar. From time to time, she was heard threatening Phillip and Paul with a phone call home to tell their parents about the situation. Hearing this, Phillip and Paul would sober up, at least for a while. The way both boys reacted the moment a phone call to parents was brought up, it seems that she had actually followed through on her threat before.

One wonders why Donovan was not threatened with the same measure. As he expressed it during my interview with him, one thing Donovan's father appreciated was getting a phone call from a teacher about any lack of effort on the part of his child. He said that in his eyes, the best teacher in his eyes was one who acts like a parent. The only time he was called to come to Southview Community School, however, was when Donovan was wrongly accused of breaking a school window. The inference I would draw from this is differential treatment by race, since all boys came from working-class families. This suggests that race is much more complex, far-reaching and hurtful as a factor in comparison with class.

### A NEW BREED OF FAILING AFRICAN-CANADIAN STUDENTS

In the 1970s and 80s, a huge proportion of African-Canadian students in the Ontario school system came from the Caribbean. Most of them followed their parents, mostly their mothers, after having been looked after by their maternal grandmothers. While the mother sent money from Ontario for their upkeep, the grandmothers looked after them well. Most of them missed their grandparents badly after coming to Canada, following in the footsteps of their mothers. Some lucky ones had their grandmothers join them in Canada. While their children continued their education in the Caribbean, these mothers worked very hard here in Canada, most often taking several jobs to prepare the way for a long-awaited reunion. The stories of Shrika, Trisha and her cousins are excellent examples of this phenomenon. The purpose of mentioning this, however, is not to imply that the separations these children experienced impacted their learning desire or ability in any way.

This study has shown that after arrival in Ontario, while parents looked after their physical and emotional needs of their children, their educational needs were left to the school. As Trisha and her cousin aptly narrated it, the problem was culture shock and having to deal with an English accent that was alien to them. While they dealt with the strange accent and fast talk for unnecessarily longer periods of time, their education suffered and was consequently assessed to be below grade level. Trisha's cousin has articulated how the school system misjudged this cultural adjustment problem and designated him as in need of Special Education.

Explaining the reasons for the below grade level achievement of black students became a challenge for the school. Officially, school officials attributed the underachievement to anything from adjustment problems to lack of parental and community support (James and Brathwaite 1996). However, in unofficial

discussions among administrators, higher officials and teachers, at least one of the reasons identified was shock and trauma - trauma because they were left behind by their mothers for years back in the Caribbean. The youth who participated in this study utterly disagreed with either of these explanations having any role in their disengagement problems. Being left behind with a loving and spoiling grandmother was no traumatic experience. Rather, they attributed their failures to a school system which failed to understand them and mislabeled them as slow learners while they struggled to learn a new way of speaking English. In the words of Trisha's cousin, "You are shy and confused under culture shock and maybe when they talk faster, you kind of miss it, then they say you are dumb, retarded, deaf and with sight problems" (File: PAIN06, p. 13).

This breed of African-Canadian students does not exist anymore. Their numbers started to dwindle drastically by early 1980 and completely stopped by the end of the eighties (Sadlier 2009). For example, as the data in this study shows, one-third of the students in Mrs. Peterson's class were African-Canadians, but only two of them were recent immigrants who had followed their mothers to Canada. The rest were born in Toronto, and one was born in Britain.

The change in the African-Canadian student body was reflective of the change in labour and immigration policies of Canada. Other than seasonal farm labourers, Canada stopped importing cheap labour from the Caribbean in the 1980s (Galabuzi 2006). Therefore, reunification of children with their parents as a source of new immigrant students in the Ontario school system had trickled down to zero by the late 1980s.

Most African-Canadian students in Ontario today are born in Canada. Those who are not born in Canada have migrated straight from Africa, together with their parents. Therefore, neither adjustment nor shock and trauma apply to their situation. It should also be noted that a significant portion of the African-Canadian students in Ontario today are direct immigrants from Africa, with a huge portion of that coming from Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. The latest waves of immigrants to come out of Africa are from Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan. This trend is reflective of the lack of political stability in these source countries (Sadlier 2009: 282).

Indeed, the composition of the African-Canadian student body has been constantly changing (Cheng et al 1987, 1989, 1992, 1993; Yau and O'Reilly 2007). Their achievement level, however, has not changed. Their drop-out rate was 40% in the 1980s and 1990s and, it remains the same during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In support of the opening of the Africentric School in Toronto, Gerry Connolly, the former director of the TDSB, admitted that the school system was failing black students and that something had to be done about it (The Toronto Star, Friday, October 6, 2008). Since the 1980s, educators have been silent on the reasons for higher than average drop-out rates among African-Canadian students. So far, education officials are unwilling to admit or even to consider research in relation to systemic racism as a cause for their failures. Meaningful correction of the imbalance



can only come with admission of failure to do the job of educating black students. Stopping short of such an admission is tantamount to suggesting that blacks are inferior to other races in learning and retaining knowledge.

All but one of the seven students performing below grade level in Mrs. Peterson's class were African-Canadians, and all but one of them were born in Canada, and one in Britain. So if parents like Trisha's mother or Donovan's father once thought that African-Canadian students who are born in Canada would perform better in Canadian schools than their foreign-born peers, this study will indicate the contrary. The evidence uncovered in this study shows immigrant children like Trisha and Shrika had a better fighting chance to succeed in Mrs. Peterson's class compared to the five lost and forgotten boys. While Donovan, Akil, Randy, Peter and Daniel were totally disengaged and their academic performance was getting worse, Trisha maintained pride in her ability to overcome her shortcomings and was still doing her best to keep her morale up.

There is a room for Special Education in our school system. Some children have various forms of learning disabilities, and they need modified programming. This is commendable. Evidently though, the whole Special Education designation structure has been working against African-Canadian students instead of working for them. No one explains this better than Trisha's cousin has, as quoted in chapter six: "You are afraid they will not understand you, so you remain quiet. Then they say you are dumb, retarded, deaf, and with sight problems." The achievement problems of African-Canadian students born in Ontario have different causes. For most, it begins with low expectations by teachers, and therefore lack of follow-up by the school when these students are performing poorly. The moment that their performance sinks below grade level, they are targeted for evaluation by an IPRC committee under Bill 82.

Whether students are newcomers to Ontario, like Trisha, or born in Ontario, like Akil, the process was the same. Although there was no sign of learning disability that warranted a Special Education student designation, both of these students were evaluated by a committee and placed in a special program to accommodate their "shortcomings." Sometimes, they were placed in a Special Education program without formal evaluation. Some documentation to that effect was then created and placed in the student's personal Ontario Student Record Folder. The Student Record Folder moved with the student from school to school until the end of high school, and the inappropriate Special Education designation with it.

The stated purpose of Bill 82 was to "identify the strengths and needs of the student" in question. Contrary to its purpose, Bill 82 victimized African-Canadian students by prematurely identifying them as possessing learning disabilities. Instead of providing these students with remedial help that would allow them to get up to speed with their peers, it set the bar so low that it condemned them to a perpetual deficit within the school system. As Trisha's cousin said, "...I did not have to do anything, not even attend class to pass." This is how most black students ended up being streamed into lower levels, cultivating disengagement in them until they

were eventually pushed out of school. Currently, African-Canadian students are being victimized in the same way, under the 2000 Guidelines, as will be explained in Chapter Eight.

A large proportion of the African-Canadian students in Mrs. Peterson's class were subjected to an inappropriate process for determining a Special Education designation. This certainly sealed their fate to being streamed into lower levels in high school. Therefore, the choice they had was to drop out of high school or fight back for their educational survival.

#### FROM PASSIVE RESISTANCE TO 'FADING OUT' OR FIGHTING BACK

Among grade five and six students, there is not much awareness of and therefore resistance to the Eurocentric curriculum. One has to look elsewhere for the achievement gap between the African-Canadian children and the rest of the class in Mrs. Peterson's room. It has already been indicated in the preceding chapters that both inappropriate teaching strategies and neglect in providing much needed remedial help was to blame. There is also a strong indication that the hidden curriculum may have a lot to do with the gap.

The hidden curriculum for this purpose is defined as the unstated part of the curriculum and teaching practice. It is generally understood to be the implied and quietly practiced component of the curriculum. Officially, the school's policy was to offer special help to those children who come from crowded homes, poorer areas and those who live in public housing - some of whom may not have a home phone at times, etc. - however, unofficially, administrators and teachers considered any of these factors as indicators of learning problems. It was taken as a sign that no matter how much the school does for them, these students will not perform adequately in the school system. For example, Trisha was very hardworking, as well as very serious about her education. She just wanted enough remedial help. Yet, Mrs. Peterson's comments about her were "She will always fall behind (in her school work)." Mrs. Peterson's comments show that she had given up on Trisha before she offered adequate remedial support.

It so happened that with the exception of one family from El Salvador, all the children in Mrs. Peterson's class who lived in public housing (five families in all), were African-Canadians. Only two African-Canadian students lived in what are considered to be single-family homes, while another two lived in multiple low-income dwellings. Therefore, there was a strong correlation between being African-Canadian and poorer, and being placed in a lower stream in the subject classroom. In this way, the interlocking nature of race and class cannot be ignored as an indicator of streaming practices. At the same time, the challenges faced by racial minorities cannot be subsumed to those of class for the simple reason that racism is a much bigger hurdle for African-Canadians compared to class bias.

The hidden curriculum worked in multiple ways to disadvantage African-Canadian children. As explained before, the only time Donovan's father was called



to school was when his son was accused of breaking a window. He was never called in to discuss Donovan's multiple uncompleted writing, spelling and math assignments. Perhaps it is a wonderful idea to policy makers to send kindergarten teachers to their students' homes for a visit. However, this noble idea does not survive the hidden dominant values held by teachers. While they come back from these visits impressed by middle-class households, they come back with a different impression of working-class and poorer households. Their condescending attitude deems these homes to be overcrowded, music blaring, with no corner for a child to work from. They come back from these visits believing that no matter what they do for these students, they will never excel in their education. Consequently, students like Donovan, Akil, Daniel, Peter, Randy, and even new immigrants, like Trisha are left to sink or swim. Unless something drastic happens to intervene, these students are slated for Special Education, or a half-step above it, but still relegated to a lower stream.

Dei et.al. (1997) and other researchers have presented the scenario of what happens to students in the lower streams at the high school level. This study establishes that passive resistance at the elementary school level is replaced by fading out or dropping out later in high school. However, this outcome is not totally pre-determined, because there are also those who decide to challenge the system that failed them, who decide to become activists for change, for themselves and for others at that tender high school age. The unpleasant experiences they face at both elementary and high school levels does not break or permanently silence them, it makes them stronger and more perceptive about how systemic racial bias works. Eventually, they determine that it is not entirely their fault that they were having problems in school, but that the education system, and beyond that, the dominant society, share much of the blame.

I met such a group of eight black high school students turned activists in 1986 in the process of doing a study on streaming (Sium 1987). Like Trisha and her cousins, they all followed their mothers from the Caribbean to Toronto years later. Likewise, they all faced adjustment and racial problems similar to Trisha and her cousins. There was no doubt in their minds that the Ontario education system was utterly racist; that it guided black students towards the lower streams of Special Education, basic and general streams, and away from advanced (academic) and gifted streams. In other words, they were directed away from the option of undertaking a university education to the work world. If they graduated with a high school diploma, then they could go to college. Based on their assessment of the system, they decided that they were going to get the best of what the educational system had to offer - a university education.

My exchange with them follows (from File: PAIN06, p. 59-64). My first question during a group focus group interview was, "Have you ever felt that the school system was not taking you seriously?" My question was met with collective laughter. To them, the answer was all too obvious:

- David: I was not taken seriously most of my school life. In the end, I decided that I was not going to care about what my teachers thought about me. I was just going to do my own thing.
- Patrick: This one teacher, I had heard from friends that she is prejudiced. I asked her a question and she ignored it. I raised my hand up again, she tried to ignore me, but I kept my hand up for about five minutes, and I got to ask her. She didn't like the question, so she asked me to leave. I picked up my stuff and went straight to the principal's office. He is a reasonable man. He said "just go back to class tomorrow as if nothing happened." He took care of it. Next day, I went back to class and she started taking my questions a little more seriously.
- David: There was this one teacher who kept on telling us examples of immigrants doing bad things. Once she told us of a Pakistani who started a bank. Then he disappeared, defrauding his investors. It is always the immigrants. She herself was a WASP.
- Jacqueline: It is not just me; black students are not taken seriously. Look at the student population at ... (she mentions four basic level high schools within the jurisdiction of the former Toronto Board of Education). The largest racial group is black. They don't pick on the Italians so much. I guess it is the mafia factor (with laughter).
- Andrea: In my old high school, every time I tried to inquire about a university, my guidance counsellor would ask "Why don't you consider college?" Ah! It burned me with anger. So, I changed high schools. Then just three months ago I went back to pick up my transcript. The same guidance counsellor asked, "So which college are you going?" When I said, "College? I have been admitted in the University of Toronto," she nearly died.
- Ron: All the coaches want me for their soccer, basketball, football and you name it. My answer to all of them was no, I am not interested. No one asks you how you are doing academically. If I was running the school system I would say, you have to have at least "C" average to participate in sports. I hear from friends in other schools that there is such a rule in some of them, but no one follows it.
- Patricia: I left ..., (names a basic and general level school in North York) and moved to ..., (names an collegiate known mostly for its active and strong black students' club), because in my old school most students are hanging out in the cafeteria or go to the playground and play during class. They want to play rather than learn, and the school just lets them.
- Jacqueline: They glorify sports. They have banquets for them. It is the athletes; it becomes an end in itself. So when they ask me if I play sports, I say "no I study" is my answer. That is all I do. The whole thing puts me off against sports. I think this is due to a poor portrayal of blacks in the media.

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I also wanted to know what they thought about responsibilities of black students and their parents, in this grim situation they painted. I wondered if they thought black students and parents shared any responsibility in what was happening to them in Toronto schools.

Jacqueline: Just by remaining silent about it, black students and parents share responsibility in what is happening with streaming. Parents should do something about it, before a whole generation of blacks becomes blue collar labourers.

Carol: Many of my friends have accepted and followed whatever they were told to do by their teachers. Later on, they started hanging out and smoking, then pregnancy followed. Now, they are on welfare. So I say they share responsibility.

These are stories of disappointment, struggle and ultimately triumph but stories of far too few, leaving behind in the lower streams far too many African-Canadian students. Of course, a relegation to the lower streams leaves these students at risk of dropping out of high school.

I only stayed in touch with three of the participants from my focus group for years afterwards. I knew that Jacqueline, who said who wanted to be a journalist, completed her degree in Humanities at the University of Toronto, and later completed a certificate in Journalism at Ryerson. Her first job was for TV Ontario, and yes, she made it in front of the camera. The last I heard from her, she had moved to New York to work for a TV network there. I also knew that Andrea and Ron were studying at York University. I lost touch with the rest of the group shortly after the interview, but I have no reason to doubt that they were able to accomplish what they had planned.

### WHITE STUDENTS IDENTIFY REASONS WHY THEY DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL

There is no question that the school drop-out phenomenon hits all ethnic and racial groups. However, this study shows that the reasons why African-Canadians drop out are not the same reasons that Euro-Canadian students drop out. It should also be noted that the problem of dropping out is predominantly a problem of working-class and new immigrant students.

During the early 1990s, I had the opportunity to listen to about 26 drop-backs explaining why they had dropped out of school years earlier. Their speaking tour went on over a period of years before community and charitable groups in the city of Toronto. Their narratives are presented in this section as a control group to provide cross-referencing.

All but two of the 26 high school drop-backs were Euro-Canadians, mostly from rural and small town Ontario. The roots of the 24 Euro-Canadian students go all over Europe, including Southern, Central and Northern. The two black youth and a few of

the Euro-Canadians were born and raised within the Metropolitan City of Toronto. Invariably, they were forced to flee their homes to escape physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their adoptive, as well as biological parents - with one note: that all the cases of sexual abuse were inflicted by adoptive parents. Again, they all ended up in foster or group homes after they ran away. Paradoxically, when that did not work, their next option was to move to the downtown core of the former City of Toronto for refuge, where they ended up in youth shelters.

As homeless youth, they had a lot of time on their hands and had the full day to scour the city for food and other necessities. This made them obvious targets of pimps and drug pushers. Indeed, most of them ended up pushing drugs and prostituting themselves in the streets of Toronto. Out of the tens of thousands of homeless youth in the former City of Toronto at the time, only a small percentage were getting help to get off the street and get back to school by local NGOs. With the help of funding from the federal government, they were able to focus on their education, and many went on to universities and colleges to further their chances of creating better opportunities for their lives.

Their narratives were as captivating as they were heart-wrenching. In their own words, they described what happened to them. Patricia was an excellent student, performing at the top of the class. Here is how she described what happened to her:

My behaviour changed dramatically by the time I got to grade seven, due to a disruptive home life. My parents often argued and split up. Soon, they would be back together again, only to part and unite quite frequently. In grade seven, I started to experiment with drugs and alcohol to try to forget my home problems and by grade eight, my drug use escalated. One day I had 30 “hits” and started selling the stuff to fellow students. Finally, I was caught and had to run away both from home and school. (File: PAIN06, p. 87)

Patricia tried to be self-sufficient while she was completing grade eight. She secured a part-time job for the purpose of being economically independent of her parents. She tried to walk the good road, even at age 12, but her dysfunctional home environment and drinking and drug use got in the way. One day, she arrived at work drunk, and she was fired on the spot.

Some of these drop-backs had had an okay relationship with their adoptive parents. However, the trauma they had experienced earlier at the hands of uncaring and physically abusive, mostly alcoholic biological parents left them with lasting psychological problems, and they themselves became abusive, even towards those who loved them and cared for them. Tracy was such person:

The first memories I have of my childhood are sad ones. I was put up for adoption as an infant. I am the kind of person who does not find nice things to say about anyone around me, including my parents and teachers. I am always fighting for reasons I can’t even understand myself sometimes. (FILE PAIN06, p. 63)

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Trauma came from different sources to Gordon. At 15, he moved to Toronto from Orangeville, Ontario with his mother and little sister. The rest is as follows:

Grade nine, first year of high school in a new city, not knowing anybody, I was as nervous as a man on a tightrope. As soon as we came to Toronto, my mother's drinking problem got worse. Soon Children's Aid took my little sister, but lucky me (facetiously), my father just got out of jail and I moved in with him. He did not have his own place, so we lived with my aunt. His job was truck driver with a temporary employment company, so I did not see much of him. At the same time, my drug problems took complete control of me and I decided to sleep in every morning, and finally, I decided not to go to school at all. (FILE PAIN06, p. 78)

David was adopted by a family which had four adopted children even before his arrival. Despite all the problems he inherited from his early life experiences being raised by physically abusive parents, he excelled in his education and continued to do so until grade eight. Finally, he was overcome by persistent nagging comments from his adoptive parents that made him feel unloved:

When I was two years-old, I was taken out of my birth family and placed into foster homes until the age of eight. Then I was adopted into a family that already had four adopted children. When there are five adopted children in one family, each child has had problems even before coming into a new family. ...My parents did not know what it was like to be physically abused. They will say to me why can't you be like your sisters and brothers. I did not fit into my parents' life the way that they wanted me to, be a good little boy and do as we tell you to do. Therefore upon completing grade nine, I left them and came to a youth shelter and dropped out of school. (FILE PAIN06, p. 81)

For some, abuse came from multiple corners. Jane was the child of a mother who loved to party and binge-drinking around the clock. Consequently, she was left with a male neighbour babysitter in their Ontario housing project apartment every time that her mother went out. Her mother would come home with her boyfriends, totally drunk. The cycle of abuse worsened until she could not bear it any longer.

Jackie was born to a teenage alcoholic mother, and therefore was taken by the Children's Aid Society (CAS) when she was only three years-old. The adoptive family was headed by a prominent lawyer in a small town in Ontario. As a consequence of the terrible sexual abuse she experienced over the course of a few years, she developed multiple personalities to cope. With no help coming from anywhere, she had to develop her own strategy for survival:

My father started sexually abusing me when I was seven years-old, and it went on for many years. I was 12 years old before I told anybody because I didn't

think anyone would believe me. I ran away and came to Toronto. ...I met this nice guy in a donut store who bought me food and clothes and took me to his apartment and supported me for about a week. We were taking drugs together. Then one day, he told me I have to contribute, so he asked me to turn tricks and took me to (mentions a corner in down town Toronto) catch johns and that is how I have been supporting myself and most importantly my drug habit. (FILE PAIN06, p.109)

As part of her multiple personalities, Jackie was highly literate and philosophical some days, while on others, she was totally withdrawn and unable to write anything. On other days she could be very unhappy, angry and ready to fight with everyone around her over minute issues.

All Euro-Canadian students went on at great length to describing the toxic home environments that had forced them to drop out of school. None of them stated that their teachers were unsympathetic to their predicaments. They did not blame the school for not caring about their education, nor blame it as a cause for their dropping out of school. Since there were striking similarities in their home experiences of the 24 students, I consider the above sample of their narratives sufficient.

What was interesting about the group was that the two African-Canadian students revealed that they were victims of a double-layered mistreatment. Not only were they mistreated by their families, but also by their schools. In contrast, to the experiences of their Euro-Canadian counterparts, their teachers did not express any sympathy towards them, nor did they express encouragement to try to stay in school. Cathy was one of the two who participated in the program. She writes:

When I was young, I hated school. It had nothing to offer. I could not concentrate on what I had to do at school; I had too many distractions and not enough attention from teachers. I really could have been a good kid, but no teacher gave me a chance. Instead I was sent to the principal's office, made to stay after school, and at times, separated from the whole class, with my desk in the hall. All the teachers I had were glad to pass me on. No one wanted to see that I had difficulties at home. At the same time, my family problems got worse and worse. (FILE PAIN06, p. 114)

Morgan was the other African-Canadian student in the group. His family experience was not any different from any other student's experience. He endured severe putdowns and letdowns at the hands of both of his biological parents. He relayed how he received no emotional support from them, and how he was often described by his father as 'retarded.' At the time of speaking out he said, "If only I knew then what I know now, boy was my father ever wrong" (FILE PAIN06, p. 117). In hindsight, he completely disagreed with his father about the level of his intelligence. Like Cathy, but unlike all the Euro-Canadian students, Morgan also harboured misgivings about the school system:

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If I could sit down and explain how it makes me feel when someone asks me to write anything about school, I would say I want to forget. Anytime I had problems with any of my classmates, I was blamed and I always took the blame, without hesitation. (FILE PAIN06, p. 116)

One thing they all - both black and white students - agreed about is that their dropping out of school was an unfortunate event in their lives, and that they all dropped back in to school to improve their chances of getting better jobs. Perhaps Tracy provided a sample of their collective thoughts and prior efforts when she said:

Every time I made an attempt to get my act together, I was turned away. Having a minimal amount of education, no one would hire me or wanted to take a chance on me because I left school, and all the doors of life were closed to me and the key was going back to school and getting my education. (FILE PAIN06, p. 65)

It was clear that most of them wanted to get well-paying jobs and to establish regular routines in their daily lives, and they went out in the world around them hoping to make their dreams come true. However, they were not able to get very far. To their utter disappointment, they found out that they needed more education. Most decent jobs came with the requirement of high school diploma. They all nodded their heads in agreement when she stated:

I saw all these people dressed in nice and clean clothes going to their work places around Bay Street and I wanted to be just like them. I wanted to have the same kind of job, and I started to inquire about how I get a job like that. To my total disappointment, I found out that I needed a high school diploma to apply and that is the reason I am back at school. ...I wanted to be a child and youth worker. (FILE PAIN06, p. 114)

Comparing the narratives of the two groups turned out to be an eye-opener for me. I did not realize until I started comparing the narratives what kind of useful data I had in my files. The data shows one group of students pushed around by the school system and another by their home environment. African-Canadian students were mostly loved and nurtured by their home life, but had to drop out of school or take their own education into their own hands to succeed. They had to act like their own guidance counsellors. Meanwhile, Euro-Canadian student drop-outs had the reverse experience, with the same consequences.

## SUMMARY

The school system may not have created the class system in Ontario, but this chapter has found that it has worked to reinforce it. Through its selection process of students for streamed categories, it has worked to channel working-class children prematurely into the work force. Contrary to its public image as equalizer of



educational opportunities, the public education system failed the very students that most needed its help.

Further, during the 1970s and eighties, there was a widespread perception among teachers and school administrators that African-Canadian children who were born outside Canada, and followed their parents here years later, were failing in schools due to emotional adjustment problems. Contrary to that, this chapter has shown those who were born in Canada or migrated to Canada with their parents have not performed any better than their counterparts. Thus the disproportionately high rate of streaming of African-Canadian students into applied/workplace courses, and their higher drop-out rates in high school are attributed to systemic racism.

It has been shown in this study that the overwhelming majority of African-Canadian students still find themselves streamed into applied/workplace courses, and therefore the dropout rate among them remains much higher compared to other racial groups, with the exception of Aboriginal students. Furthermore, this chapter has shown that the TDSB has become more efficient in testing and placing children into Special Education programs. The data suggests that more and more African-Canadian students are still being victimized by its efficiency by being misidentified as requiring Special Education programs. This study also suggests that the Board has been actively misrepresenting purpose of Special Education and streaming in high schools to marginalized parents, as well as students. Thus, programs created with good intentions for the students who really need them seem to be continually trapping students who do not belong there.

The claim of differential treatment of students by the school system on the basis of race was supported by two groups of high school students that I interviewed. While a group of black senior high school students castigated the school system for failing black students, a group of white, drop-outs blamed their decision to drop out of school on abuse inflicted on them by their caregivers, and/or the denial of basic necessities at home. Opinions about the school system could not have been clearer. While every black student blamed the school system for failing African-Canadian students, none of the white school drop-outs had any negative comments about it. In retrospect, Euro-Canadian students felt that the school system had done its part adequately.

Chapters Four to Seven have shown the experiences of students and parents in the Toronto school system from the 1980s until present, with more emphasis on the 1980s. I felt that it was absolutely crucial to link the eighties with the up-to-date situation. I ask myself: Have there been substantive changes to improve the educational opportunities of marginalized children? Chapter Eight has taken a historical perspective approach in order to make a fair assessment and to track what has taken place through the decades since my study was carried out.



## A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Several years have passed since this study was conducted, and yet its main observations continue to be relevant to our current educational system. Has there been substantial change in the way the Ontario education system works? Has there been any movement towards an inclusive education in Ontario? If so, what exactly has changed? The answer to these questions, unfortunately, is an emphatic no.

I reviewed an array of relevant studies and reports published between 1987 and 2009 (cited below), and they suggest that no progress has been made towards democratization and diversification of education to accommodate all students in the Ontario school system. What has happened is essentially a reshuffling of the cards in the deck to give the impression that slow, but steady change is really happening. I would argue, however, that racialized and working-class kids are in pretty much the same position they were in during the 1980s. Inclusive education has, by and large, remained just a dream.

An inclusive school environment is defined as one which has taken irreversible steps towards the acquisition of three necessary elements for democratization of the classroom. First, it empowers students to be heard in what is taught and how it is taught in school. Second, it embraces an adequately diversified curriculum which has national, as well as global, concerns at heart, and third, its workforce reflects the racial, ethnic and gender composition of the community it serves. Some researchers have been hard at work shedding some light on democratization and diversification strategies. Among the few, is one by a noted teacher and researcher, Debbie Miller (2002) *Reading with Meaning*. The weakness of Miller's work is that it was conducted in an exclusively middle-class white school. It is easy to see that the issues and concerns in an inner-city multicultural school would be different, requiring different approaches. With some modifications however, Miller's model for change could work in a multicultural society. In fact, a study conducted by K. Cooper and R. White has done just that. One of the schools they included in their study was an inner-city school in Toronto (Cooper and White 2006).

The issue of democracy in education, and the lack of progress in diversifying the curriculum in Toronto are getting more attention from researchers in the field of education (Radwanski 1987; Darden 1991; Shor 1992; Osler 1994; Delpit 1995; O'Sullivan 1999; Osborne 2001; Portelli 2001; Solomon 2001; Egan 2002; Trifonas 2002; Duckworth 2006; Portelli 2007). All of these studies make clear that democratization and diversification efforts in education in Toronto have not been making significant progress. Rather, change has been painfully slow, and the end result is far from satisfactory. It occurs not incrementally, but in an "ebb and flow" kind of a pattern.

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A look at the history of the former boards in Metropolitan Toronto, and now the TDSB over the last thirty or so years shows this ebb and flow change pattern. In his book, *Race to Equity*, Tim McCaskell has chronicled this phenomenon (McCaskell 2005). The boards gave in a bit as calls for change from school communities, activists, parents, advocating teachers, and students got stronger. It seems, however, that as soon as the political masters changed, or the voices for change ebbed, Board bureaucrats worked in tandem with the incoming, more conservative political masters to take away all or most of the changes they had relented to in earlier times (Kerr 2002; McCaskell 2005). If nothing else, it is clear that there is a need to ensure that small gains stick, and that the conceding elements of the school system are held accountable to see through these gains with a long-term strategy.

In fact, the voices of change for more democratic and diversified schooling have been active ever since public education started over a century ago. Since the seventies, the struggle for change in Toronto has taken a new tone; as equity for minority students took centre stage, so did public demands for greater inclusivity within the school environment. Gender, race and ethnic-based inequalities in particular received considerable attention. The eighties and nineties ushered in some of the most vocal parents and activists on education. Quoted in 1994 in a report compiled for the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education, here is what one parent said about the source of conflict:

The system, and I hate to sound so strong ideologically all the time, but it is the reality ... the system has served those who have been privileged in the sense of being part of the Anglo community, those who have been part of the economically comfortable community. The system has served those very well. There've been people it hasn't served. There are always exceptions, just like there are exceptions in the less well-off socio-economic groups in the immigrant community. There are great success stories there too, but they're the exception. The system we've had has served the successful very well, and so the successful will always try to defend the status quo. (Dehli 1994:75)

Such a view may not have been shared by every parent, but there certainly was enough support to move the former boards of education in Metropolitan Toronto to take some steps, albeit baby steps, towards the creation of a more inclusive school environment.

There is no shortage of studies conducted since the 1980s. Ontario provincial governments, teachers' unions, school boards, civil societies, community groups, and academics have been active studying our educational system. As an increasing number of youth in Ontario, particularly in amalgamated Toronto, became more and more defiantly agitated and disengaged in the classroom, more studies were commissioned by different entities. No doubt, the addition of parents' and community groups' voices of concern helped to heighten the level of awareness of inequities in the Ontario school system. Since then, the number of studies conducted and reports prepared per decade escalated in response to escalating youth disengagement and

rebellion. (see for example, Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller (1992); Dei, Mazucca, McIsaac, and Zine (1995); Brathwaite and James (1996); Antonelli (2004); Cooper and White (2006); Yau and O'Reilly (2007); Toronto Public Health (2008); Children's Aid Society of Toronto (2008); Curling and McMurtry (2008); People for Education (2008) and (2009).

#### RACE-BASED STATISTICS ON ACHIEVEMENT AND STREAMING

The first school board to compile race-based statistics on achievement and streaming in Ontario classroom was the former School Board for the City of Toronto. Starting in the 1970s, the board launched its research department and conducted studies right up to the 1990s, before it was amalgamated with the four other boards within the old City of Toronto. Its data was unique in that it tracked student achievement (or lack of it) and steaming levels according to race, long before parent, community, activists, and academics asked for a tracking of these statistics. Simultaneously, the board conducted surveys on the ethno-cultural composition of the Toronto public school teaching staff and school board officials by race and gender, and provided crucial data (Larter and Eason 1978, Cheng et al 1980, Wright and Dhanota 1981, Tsugi and Wright 1982, Wright 1985, Tsuji 1986, Cheng 1987, Cheng et al 1989, Cheng et al 1992). That board's efforts represented a landmark in research in education. In undertaking this research, it ruffled the feathers of the status quo-oriented Ontario Ministry of Education and other school boards' officials, and no doubt earned resentment within the ranks of some political parties.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, the former Toronto Board of Education asked students how they ended up in levels 1, 2, and 3. After David Peterson's Liberal government reorganized and renamed the streams, these three levels were renamed basic stream. After yet another renaming of the different levels by Mike Harris's Progressive Conservative government, these streams are known today as essential/locally developed. Asked about how they ended up in levels of 1, 2 and 3, 46% of students answered that they were placed in those levels, and it was not their choice. They also said that the courses were too easy for them and that there was nothing too appealing within the curriculum. Only 27% of students in levels of 4 and 5 (those were courses that had previously known as *general* and *advanced*, i.e. geared for college and university-bound students, and today are known as *applied/workplace* and *academic*) said the level they ended up joining was suggested to them by others. They found the courses more interesting and challenging (Larter and Eason 1978).

Soon after that, the identification and collection of data got better; the board started to survey students and collect data by race. This allowed concerned parents and community groups to know where their children stood by race and class. The 1980 Grade Nine Student Survey found that 64.6% of black students were streamed into basic and general levels, meaning that going to university was put out of their reach. By comparison, less than half of white students, and only about a quarter of Asian students were streamed into these categories. The statistics on aboriginal

students showed comparable results to that of black students (Wright and Dhanota 1981).

The Board of Education for the former City of Toronto continued collecting race-based statistics intermittently until the mid-1990s. Among such endeavours is one conducted in 1985, as a follow-up to the initial survey of 1980. The survey entitled, *The Retention and Credit Accumulation of Students in Secondary School*, found that “Black students were twice as more likely to earn a basic level credit and four times as Asian students” (Wright 1985:27). Essentially the survey corroborated the findings of the 1980 survey. The same survey of 1985 also found that black and aboriginal students were more likely to accumulate fewer credits after four years in high school, and were more likely to drop out before graduation.

There were at least three race-based surveys carried out before the curtain came down on this practice in the mid-1990s. Data was collected under the title of the “Every Secondary Student Survey” (Larter et al 1987, 1989, 1993). Every survey proved that things were at a standstill as far as improvements for black, aboriginal, working-class, and other marginalized students. Their level of achievement and transition from basic and general level courses to advanced courses remained unchanged.

Perhaps the Board sensed a change in political climate, when it started to slow down in carrying out surveys; this endeavour came to a complete halt by the time Mike Harris’s Progressive Conservative government was elected in Ontario in June 1995, riding high on white male backlash. Indeed, the officials of the former School Board for the former City of Toronto were sidelined and weeded out of their jobs during amalgamation of the five former school boards. More conservative and status quo-favoring officials from the other school boards took over the leadership of the new board, and gladly implemented the restructuring and downsizing programs of the Mike Harris government. In short, the concerns of *equity* and *inclusive* education were replaced by *quality control* and *outcomes-based education*, backed by funding cuts. This particular political-historical moment proved to be a major setback for the movement for inclusive education (McCaskell 2005; Kerr 2006).

Perhaps it was no coincidence that the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) resumed surveying staff and students in the fall of 2006, at a time when the Director of Education was Gerry Connelly, one of the few remaining officials from the former Toronto Board of Education. At this time, the TDSB conducted an extensive survey of grade seven through 12 students at 289 schools. The survey asked every student highly personal and confidential questions about their race, sexuality, home life, disabilities, as well their feelings about teachers, school safety and how welcome they felt in class and around the school. To ensure high participation, the written questionnaire was done during class-time. The survey was likely only possible because the Harris-Eves Conservative governments were few years removed. However the data collected in the fall of 2006 and published for public distribution in March 2007 did not go far enough. Though described as a groundbreaking survey by some commentators, it failed to collect race-based statistics on the level of achievement and the streaming

status of all children, unlike the research that the former Toronto Board had collected prior to the Harris in Ontario. Some African-Canadian and labour activists have called for the collection of data on streaming and achievement by race and socio-economic status (SES) on an ongoing basis, so that concerned parents will know where their children place in terms of stream and performance.

At the high school level, the survey found that 33% of all students identified themselves as white, 67% identified themselves as racial minorities, and from the latter group, 12% identified themselves as black. Among grades seven to eight, the proportion of non-whites was slightly more dominant. While 31% identified as white, a whopping 69% were racial minorities, 15% of them blacks. The higher proportion of racial minorities at the elementary level is consistent with the dramatic increase of new immigrants from Asia and Africa, which certainly will mean further multi-culturalization of Toronto (Yau and O'Reilly 2007, p. 10).

#### ON RACIAL AND GENDER COMPOSITION OF STAFF

The first window we have had on race-based statistics on the representation among board employees was again provided by the former Toronto Board of Education. The first attempt to collect such data was made in the fall of 1985; its findings published in May 1986 (Tsuji 1986). However, the idea of conducting a survey of all staff already employed by the Board was not even attempted. Every time the idea was mentioned, there was collective gasp and uproar among white males. As a result, the Board backed down from seeking out these statistics every time. Therefore, the Board limited itself to providing racial breakdowns of new hires only, and even then, only the categories of white and visible minority were tracked, while details on the composition of different groups of racial minorities were omitted. Details surrounding the number of aboriginals, blacks, Asians etc. already employed as staff was still left unclear.

The Board hired 858 new employees in the fall of 1985, but only 22 of those positions were filled by visible minorities (Tsuji 1986); that was just under 3% of all new hires. The survey found that equally qualified visible minority applicants were passed over, in spite of the fact that there was intensifying criticism by parent groups, activists and some academics about the lack of diversity among the staff. The problem of underrepresentation was particularly pronounced among frontline staff, who did not even remotely reflect the racial diversity among students.

Another survey was taken in the fall of 1987. This time it took all existing Board employees into consideration, from top officials to the frontline. The report summarized:

The 1987 work force audit shows that the racial composition of the Toronto Board of Education's existing work force does not reflect the proportion of racial minorities in the external work force. The percent of visible minority staff is 7.9% in the Board, compared to 19% in the Metropolitan Toronto work force. (Cheng 1987:12)

The report states on the same page that, “The presence of visible minority teaching and non-teaching personnel in the schools (8.5%) is low relative to the proportion of visible minority students in the schools (26-30%).” Furthermore, it concluded “There was no change in the overall representation rate of non-white employees between 1981 and 1987.” That lack of change over time revealed the Board’s ongoing culture of racist exclusion, and despite external pressures to diversify its staff, its conscious and systematic filling of vacancies with white applicants. At the same time, the Board hid this systematic exclusion behind its very progressive (at least on paper) Employment Equity Policy.

The last report to come out of the Board before Mike Harris swept equity and inclusiveness out of the picture was in April 1992. The survey, entitled *A Survey of 1989-90 Teaching Job Applicants*, wanted to find out if the success rates of racial minority job applicants were similar to the success rates of other job applicants with similar qualifications and experience. In a way, its focus was limited to job applicants and new hires. To no one’s surprise, the survey found that while 31% of whites succeeded in getting the jobs they applied for, only 16% of non-whites succeeded in the elementary panel. At the secondary panel, 21% of whites and only 9% of non-whites succeeded (Cheng et al 1992:1). The survey also found that white females had a higher than average chance of success getting the jobs they applied for, followed by white males, who had an average chance of success. On the other hand, females of colour experienced success rates well below average, and males of colour the least chance of success of all groups of applicants. Therefore, there was a clearly pre-determined hierarchy of success, determined by race and gender.

Like the student survey, the staff composition survey was revived in the fall of 2006. The report, *Demographic Composition of Toronto District School Board Employees, March 2007*, had some stunning revelations for those who believed the school to be a neutral ground that serves and treats all students equally regardless of their race, gender and class.

The survey of 2007 found that although almost 70% of students in the amalgamated City of Toronto were visible minorities, 77% of their teachers were white. The composition among principals and vice-principals was found to be worse; 80% were white and only 20% were from visible minorities. Perhaps to no one’s surprise, among the Board’s senior teams, which includes the director, executive officers, division heads, and superintendents was found to be 85% white and only 15% visible minorities. The composition of the caretaking staff was 76% white, 24% visible minorities and only 20% women; even then, almost exclusively white women. The language and skills required for most of the positions among caretaking staff are not that high, and therefore these jobs are the most easily accessible to most racialized immigrants. It is simply a lack of political will on part of government that this imbalance has persisted.

The report concluded that women were grossly under-represented among the caretakers (p. 3). It also concluded that East Asians, South Asians, Africans, Hispanics and Middle Eastern and white-Eastern Europeans are underrepresented



in the TDSB workforce compared to the City of Toronto population (p. 14). As a category, blacks have the hardest time getting employed in the first place, and an even harder time getting promoted later on (p. 26).

By the Board's own admission, there was no significant difference in staff composition between 1985, 1987 and 1992, as indicated above. Further, a comparison of visible minority representation among teachers between 1987 and 2007 shows an increase from 7.9% in 1987 to 23% in 2007. The overall picture shows no significant increase of visible minority representation when one considers visible minority student composition increasing from 26-30% in 1987 to 69% among grades seven and eight, and 64% in high school. Inversely, while the percentage of white students in the Board shrunk by a whopping 41%, the composition of white teachers decreased only by 20%. There are no statistics covering kindergarten to grade six students, but I believe that the composition of visible minority students could be even greater, since most new immigrant and refugee families are from racial minorities, and they tend to be younger and capable and willing to have more children. Commenting on who immigrates and why, John Porter states, "The need and desire to migrate is not the same for all people. The migratory population is selected, usually made up of younger adults and those who are seeking work or who hope to improve their status" (Porter 1965:40).

There are no reliable statistics to develop the same analysis with aboriginals, gays and lesbians and the disabled with regards to both students and staff composition prior to 2007. However, the composition of black teachers in the 1980s was guessed to be about 2% when the black student composition was about 10%. In 2007, the composition of black teachers was 5% while that of black students has risen to 15%. This is not a very encouraging development by any account, especially given that the proportion of drop out/push out cases among black high school students is a lot higher than average, and the proportion of African-Canadian students has increased considerably.

After revealing the above described grim statistics, the Board's report of 2007 put on a brave face and stated:

The representation of each demographic group among TDSB employees was compared with their representation in the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) workforce as a whole. This analysis shows the success of past diversity and employment equity efforts of the TDSB in that the representation of all demographic groups in the TDSB workforce is comparable to their representation in the Toronto CMA workforce. (p. 31)

Are there grounds to justify such a statement? Or was it intense pressure from higher officials that forced the researchers to whitewash the findings of the report? While the increase in visible minority students was 48% from 1987 to 2007, the increase in visible minority teachers was only 15%, all under the watchful eyes of the widely-publicized and advertised Board's Equity Foundation Statement and Employment Equity Policy. Sufficiently diverse staff to student ratio by race is one of the most

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important ingredients of an inclusive education. In a time period of 20 years, there was no improvement shown in the white to visible minority staff ratio. In other words, while the Board boasted about its courage in developing a progressive sounding Employment Equity Policy and its virtues, it went ahead with business as usual and hired and promoted members of the dominant group and passed over applicants from racialized groups.

Of course, no one expects the Board to fire a portion of the existing staff to replace them with racial minority teachers in the name of employment equity. That would be neither fair nor necessary. What is expected is that the Board will fill a significant number of - if not most - new and vacated positions with an equally qualified member of a visible minority until the imbalance is adjusted. The complaint is that nothing has been shown to correct the underrepresentation of minorities revealed in the findings of the report of the fall of 1985. Out of 858 vacant positions only 22 - which is less than 3% - went to visible minorities, even though the survey found that those visible minorities who were passed over were equally or more qualified compared to the white applicants (Tsuji 1986:2).

The latest Board survey is inadequate on many counts. The reader of this report is left in total darkness with respect to information on class, sex orientation, and disability-based barriers.

There is one bright spot on the horizon among the statistics released by the TDSB in 2007; women have made significant gains in the staff composition. They constituted 61.8% of the principals and vice-principals, 50.8% among the senior team, 83.7% of elementary teachers and 59.9% of high school teachers. Among new hires in 2006, 83.7% of elementary and 59.4% among new hires have been women. Perhaps it is not very surprising to find a higher percentage of women among elementary and high school teachers, because teaching has traditionally been associated with women. What may be surprising is their progress within the senior team and principals and vice principals. However, it has to be noted that all the benefits of equity hiring have accrued almost exclusively to white women. While white women have been brought into the fold of senior administration, they have often been paraded as a sign of full hiring equity, or even taken their place as contributors to the process of systemic racism in the area of hiring. They have shown equal willingness to discriminate against visible minorities, visible minority women included. The phenomenon shows that race is perhaps the strongest factor in the study of discrimination and exclusion.

White women still have miles to go among the caretaking staff. It should also be noted that when it comes to managerial positions in the civil service and the corporate world, women still face the glass ceiling. Collectively, they earn less to the dollar than men earn as well. Therefore, it has not been a rosy picture for white women either.

### SCHOOL DROP-OUT RATE FROM 1987 TO 2010

There has been a steady release of studies and reportage on drop-out rates for high school students in Ontario and other jurisdictions since the 1970s. Among the first



glimpse on the drop-out rate in Ontario came from a study carried out for the Ontario Ministry of Education by John Porter, B.R. Blishen and Maria Barrados, and released in 1977. In that study, the authors observe:

Higher family socio-economic status and higher levels of father's education are found to be associated with higher levels of school performance, higher levels of self-concept or ability, higher levels of educational expectations, a greater tendency to be enrolled in a five-year program (university bound) and staying in school longer. (Porter et al. 1977:130)

In other words, the lower the socio-economic status of the students, the more likely they were to have lower levels of self-concept or ability, lower educational expectations, and the more likely they will be enrolled in basic and general level streams. Combined, these likelihoods create a formula for an overall predisposition to drop out of school. The findings of the above study were corroborated by a number of other studies. Among them are Cheng et al 1980, Radwanski 1987, Curtis et al 1995, and the Begin-Caplan Ontario Royal Commission Report 1994.

The above-referenced studies do not factor in race as a cause of channeling students to lower streams and therefore underachievement. However, there is no shortage of other studies and reports that do.

A report compiled by the Children's Aid Society of Toronto found that children of racialized groups are more likely to live in poverty. Published under the title of, "Greater Trouble in Greater Toronto – Child Poverty in the GTA," the report found that one child in ten among European groups; one child in five for East Asian groups; one child in four for Aboriginal, South Asian, Caribbean, South & Central American groups; one child in three for children of Arab and West Asian groups; and one child in two for children of African groups lives in poverty (Children's Aid Society of Toronto 2008).

As Porter et al found, there is a strong correlation between living in poverty and being slotted into lower streams, and therefore being hit with the highest drop-out rate. There is an exception to that general expectation. By and large, all Asian groups have found a way in excelling in education - even those who live in poverty. There are explanations for this phenomenon. My theory is that the vast majority of Asian immigrants came to Canada out of their free will and therefore tend to be educated and upwardly mobile. They come to Canada confident that their education will get them somewhere. After arrival in Canada, however, they often find that their education and skills are not recognized. One does not have to journey far in downtown Toronto to meet foreign-trained doctors, engineers or teachers who are forced to drive taxicabs to get by. Although such families reside in social housing, they know how to assist their children and motivate them. They ingrain it in their children's minds that the higher the educational level they achieve, the better their lives will be.

African-Canadians, on the other hand, followed a different route to Canada. In the 1960s and seventies, most immigrants from the Caribbean were imported for their cheap labour power to meet the labour needs of domestic cleaning, nursing homes

and restaurants. Most recruits were not chosen for their educational achievements, but for their willingness to perform unskilled or semi-skilled labour for low wages (Sadlier et al 2009:278 -279). Of course, there were others who came to pursue further education and decided not to return to the country of origin, but they were so few in comparison to those who came to work. Just about the time immigration to Canada from the Caribbean was drastically reduced in early 1980s, refugees started to arrive from the mainland, Africa. Refugees by nature are people displaced from their countries of origin due to political conflict, mostly between rebel groups and governments. People leave their homeleands due to lack of safety for them there, whether they have an education or not. In fact, most tend to have little education. African refugees, first from Eritrea and Ethiopia, followed shortly after by a big push of Somalis, arrived in Canada in significant numbers. Those, in turn, were followed by refugees from Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sudan, etc. (Sadlier et al 2009: 282). According to the report of the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, this is the new immigrant category that is living in the worst level of poverty, as pointed out above. Though coming to Canada for different reasons compared with those from the Caribbean, African-Canadians collectively share a crucial characteristic; most of them lack educational experience themselves that would help them to be aware of inequities in their children's school-related experiences in the Toronto school system. They tend to put their trust in schools to do a good job in educating their children. They have an idealist's perception of the school as an institution which serves all children equally as an honest and neutral broker. Even when they are made aware that their children are experiencing problems in school, and that their involvement is needed, they are reluctant to get involved. Perhaps this is due to a lack of confidence in knowing what the issues are and how to articulate them. Even when push comes to shove, they back down, rather than insist on advocating on behalf of their children. I would guess that at home, most of them lack the ability to motivate and inspire their children, unlike what most Asian parents are able to do. It is not unusual to see Asian and African-Canadian students streaming out of the same public housing complex, but heading to different streams or different schools altogether.

Another factor that could be examined for answers to explain the performance gap is the nature of parents' employment. Asian parents are more likely to engage in business enterprises and self-employment. One wonders if that has anything to do with looking at level of education as a tool in improving future career prospects.

Given their parents relative inexperience and lack of confidence navigating educational institutions themselves, let alone navigating Canadian ones for their children, perhaps it is less surprising that African-Canadian parents are reluctant to advocate for their children, and by high school, the drop-out rate among African-Canadian students is high. The Radwanski Report found that "While only 12 per cent of students in the highest or advanced stream leave school before graduation, the dropout rate is 62 per cent among students taking mainly general level courses and 79 per cent among students at the Basic level" (Radwanski 1987:76). It was

shown previously in this study that 64% of African Canadian students were streamed into basic and general levels in the 1970s, eighties and nineties. It is still true that the drop-out rate among African-Canadian students was 40% then, and it still is today. This is shocking given the stark contrast between the proportion of African-Canadian drop-outs to 25% drop out rate among the general student body of Toronto (People for Education 2008, Curling-McMurtry Report 2008, Social Planning Council of Ottawa 2008, Toronto Public Health Report 2008, Peoplefor Education Report 2009).

Looking at the issue of performance and streaming, “Black students were twice as whites more likely to earn a basic level credit and four times as Asian students” (Wright 1985:27). By the same token, black students streamed to the basic level were twice as white students more likely to drop out of school, and four times more likely to drop out compared to Asian students (Radwanski 1987). This is a very powerful indicator that black students are more likely to be inappropriately streamed to lower levels compared to Asian and white students. A bright child-like Trisha or her cousin is more likely to drop out of high school if streamed to basic or general levels out of boredom compared to a student who is appropriately streamed to those streams. However, while Asians and whites are more likely to be streamed to basic and general levels only when lack of potential is apparent and defensible, whereas black students are more likely to be streamed to lower levels after years of underachievement in a school system that is quicker to label them than to support them in ways that will help their development.

#### PROGRESS – OR LACK OF IT – TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In his report to the Bob Rae and the Ontario NDP government, Stephen Lewis offered his brutally frank assessment. He states, “It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that are unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in school, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping-out, ...” (Lewis 1992:2). During his search for causes for the Yonge Street riots by black youth and their supporters from all races, Stephen Lewis was asked by black students:

Where are the courses in Black history? Where are the visible minority teachers? Why are there so few role models? Why do our white guidance counselors know so little of different cultural backgrounds? Why are racist incidents and epithets tolerated? Why are there double standards of discipline? Why are minority students streamed? Why do they discourage us from University? Where are we going to find jobs? What’s the use of having an education if there’s no employment? How long does it take to change the curriculum so that we’re a part of it? (Lewis 1992:21)

African-Canadian students, along with other racial minority students, are asking the same questions today, during the second decade of the twenty-first century. As

shown above, the Toronto District School Board has neither developed inclusive courses nor diversified role models today.

According to the latest studies and Ontario government-initiated reports, black students are at the top of the list of those who do not feel included within the educational system and in society as a whole (Yau and O'Reilly 2007, Curling-McMurtry 2008, School community Safety Advisory Panel 2008, People for Education 2009), just like they did in the 1990s (Lewis 1992, Brown et al 1993, Brathwaite and James 1996, Dei et al 1997).

Top among the observers, in his report, Stephen Lewis (1992) listened to marginalized Black youth in Toronto and identified their frustrations and misgivings. In his message to Premier Bob Rae, he urged him to pass the Employment Equity legislation and implement it expeditiously and effectively. He writes:

The Employment Equity legislation should be introduced for first reading before the end of June, and if the session is for some reason prolonged, second reading should proceed. Whatever the time-table for early readings and committee consideration, the Bill should be passed by December 31, 1992, to take effect as early as possible in 1993. Furthermore, the most senior levels of the OPS (Ontario Public Service) should be mobilized to ensure rigorous implementation. (Lewis 1992:19)

By all accounts, Rae and his government acted on Lewis' recommendations. The unprecedented (with the exception of the Affirmative Action legislation in the United States in relation to African-Americans) and ground-breaking Ontario Employment legislation was set to be implemented when the Tories were elected under Mike Harris. Lewis' recommendations were rescinded during their first three months in power. The Employment Equity legislation was worded to earn results in the shortest possible time period. It gave employers, governmental, NGOs and private employers a two-year window for compliance in reflecting the ethno-cultural diversity of the population in the streets and malls of Ontario among their workforce.

Many hopes were crushed by the policy reversals brought in by Progressive Conservative Premier Mike Harris (1995 to 2002), who turned back the tiny progress that had been made towards a more inclusive society by decades. Harris' phrase, "we are not getting a good value on the dollar" became emblematic of severe restructuring, downsizing, downloading costs to cities, and funding cuts across the board in Ontario. In the end, the only thing marginalized youth and pro-equity staff gained was bitterness and backlash from white males as a result of the attempted reforms embarked on by Premier Bob Rae. Such a promising beginning towards inclusive education was nipped in the bud by funding cuts by more Conservative governments and officials (Dehli 1994, Dei 1997, McCaskell 2005, Kerr 2005).

The workplace atmosphere during the brief implementation stage of the Ontario Employment Equity legislation was poisoned by white male, mostly misguided and inflammatory whining. In one of the monthly staff meetings of a large high school, the principal was talking about what it meant to live under the regime of the then

new legislation. He himself was a white male and apparently not in total support of the proposed legislation. One white male got up and asked, "Is there any point in telling our sons to apply for any job in Ontario today?" That question was met with total silence; even the principal who was supposed to defend the intentions of the legislation was mute. The legislation's defense was left to a visible minority teacher who got up and said, "Of course you should tell your son to apply for jobs in Ontario, because the legislation is meant to eliminate discrimination and not reverse discrimination as your question implies."

By 2003, when the Harris-Eves reign was finally over in Ontario, the optimism and hope garnered by racialized communities and marginalized youth during the early 1990s was long gone. The actions and effects of eight years of Tory policies left a lot of people feeling excluded and desperate. This was reflected in the ways that African-Canadian youth started to view both the educational system and the larger society. When they had rioted in the early 1990s, they had wanted someone to hear their cries. Their frustrations were expressed to Stephen Lewis and whoever else was willing to listen. The Harris reversal of government gears brought all that to a screeching halt, and a new climate of strife and pessimism took shape.

As the new century dawned, a new spirit and line of action among black youth emerged. In 2005, what has mostly been known in the City of Toronto as "the summer of the gun" materialized. Black youth started to view themselves as hopelessly outside of mainstream society. Historical mainstream society had rejected and excluded them ever since they landed in Canada. Now they are returning the favour. Of course, gun violence did not all of a sudden take shape as a socio-political phenomenon amongst black youth. It took decades of neglect and lack of interest in their well-being. It is a logical progression from passive resistance in elementary school levels, to showing their dissatisfaction by dropping out/ fading out from high school, to creating their own world, enforced by their own rules of no giving in to state authority and a "no snitching" culture.

In a delayed reaction to the gun violence in Toronto, the Premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government asked former provincial cabinet ministers Alvin Curling and Roy McMurtry to look into the causes of the problem. The Curling-McMurtry report told more or less the same story that Stephen Lewis had told Premier Bob Rae more than a decade earlier. Unlike Premier Rae, however, Premier McGuinty has shown himself to be slow-to-uninterested to act upon the findings of the Curling-McMurtry report. Commissioning a study seems to come much easier than following up on its recommendations. At one point, there were two studies on this subject being conducted simultaneously. The TDSB's School Community Safety Advisory Panel, sometimes known as the (Julian) Falconer report, conducted its investigation concurrently with the Curling-McMurtry panel. It published its report in January of 2008, just a couple of months behind the publication of the Curling-McMurtry report.

Although Toronto high schools are by and large the incubation units for youth gun culture in Toronto, the TDSB was largely content with being an observer to what the province did until it was shamed by the murder of a 15 year-old Jordan Manners

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within the walls of one of its high schools in 2007. The entrenched Eurocentric curriculum, the streaming of African-Canadian and aboriginal children into lower levels, away from any more challenging and appropriate education, and the high drop-out rate among African-Canadian, aboriginal, and Portuguese youth did not jolt or even nudge the Board to make a move towards an inclusive education. It had to wait to be publicly shamed by the murder of an innocent youth to initiate its own report. Even now, we have not seen any tangible and measurable steps towards inclusive education yet.

Judge Julian Falconer issued his findings to the TDSB and the public. He was as frank and direct as Lewis was in his remarks:

The survey also found strong evidence that racism is a major concern of many black students at C. W. Jefferys. Indeed, the majority of black students perceived racial bias with respect to grading and disciplinary practices and feel that teachers treated some students better than others. Many black students also perceived racism outside of the school environment – especially with respect to policing activities and employment opportunities. (School Community Safety Advisory Panel 2008;:21)

There was very little new in what the panel had to say. Perhaps what was new was its identification of “the zero tolerance philosophy under the *Safe Schools Act*” as legislation that worked against marginalized students, and victimized them further. The Safe Schools Act was part of the Tory legacy. The one good thing that came out of the Falconer report was the rescinding of that act. The report also found that black students suffered proportionally more than others under the act. Otherwise, the same findings have been repeated time and again since the 1980s. What seems to be lacking is a visionary action and strategy to right the wrongs within our school system.

### SUMMARY

This chapter has presented a long list of critical studies and reports on education in Ontario that have been coming out steadily between the 1970s and 2010, completed by different expert entities. Invariably, they have meticulously documented the educational woes of children from African-Canadian and native communities in particular, and working-class children in general. At times, their passionate call for action to the Ontario government had resulted in some action being taken towards leveling the playing field for marginalized students. Sadly, these progressive initiatives were only to be dismantled by the incoming Tory government later. Thus, no significant relief has been scored in their favour between 1986 and 2010. In fact, this chapter has shown while the overwhelming majority of Toronto students were from racial minority communities, the overwhelming majority of the teaching and administrative staff in Toronto schools remained white.

Chapter Nine concludes the study with a summary of the findings, followed by some recommendations for change.

**PART III**  
**CONCLUSION**



## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Just by remaining silent about it, black students and parents share responsibility in what is happening with streaming. Parents should do something about it before a whole generation of blacks become blue collar labourers. (Jacqueline, Grade 13 student in 1986)

My ethnographic study of an urban elementary school in the mid-1980s, complemented by later conversations with secondary school students, historical research on political initiatives to make schools more inclusive, and my own observations as a teacher over three decades, suggest that progress towards inclusive schooling is marginal at best. What seems to be most significant today is that the level of activism that at times fought against the poor performance by the school system is missing. There are no significant voices for change, particularly from marginalized communities.

This chapter concludes this study. It does so by first of all providing a summary of the findings and then presenting five recommendations in sequence. It is felt, however, that the recommendations needed to be placed in context by providing a historical look at activism for change in the City of Toronto. Therefore, each recommendation is accompanied with a wider coverage of historical perspective surrounding it, and a discussion of the possible reasons why past attempts did not succeed in bringing forth the desired results.

This research project was set out to study the interplay between the degree of teacher control over the teaching and learning process in the classroom to the level and form of student contestation, and the implications of those relationships for increased program diversification and inclusivity in Toronto public schools.

I should also mention that I embarked on this study with certain understanding in mind. First, it is still my understanding that generally speaking, in a teacher-centred classroom, student contributions to the teaching and learning process are minimized, resulting in negative consequences on the development of inclusive education. By contrast, in a student-centred model of education, student contributions are encouraged, and therefore would have a positive impact on the development of inclusive education.

I found that the eight months that I spent observing the teacher-student dynamics in a single classroom provided me with ample material for observation through keeping detailed notes, as well the opportunity to gain considerable understanding of the research site and the subjects. The follow up with high school students and



changes achieved or not achieved also enrich the study considerably. Here is a summary of my findings:

- Students spent most of the school day in the formal setting, the classroom, where activities were highly-structured. Subjects were taught in sequence, almost every day, starting with a very brief News Time, followed by English, math, science, social sciences, with music and French coming in early afternoon in intermittent days. English and math took up the bulk of the school day, with English taking double the classroom time compared to math.
- Sticking to the packaged teaching material, as well as teaching activities organized around Western public and social events, such as Hallowe'en, Remembrance Day, and Christmas, prevented the diversification of the curriculum. To make matters worse, holidays and social events that most of the children were familiar with from home were excluded from being the subject of teaching and learning. Equally significant is that the teaching material was out-dated, laced with racial, gender, and class bias. Women and racialized groups were presented as weak and evil respectively, and their contributions to Canadian society were ignored.
- The longest stretch of time in the everyday life of the class was spent completing assignments individually, and much of the communication between the teacher and students was focused on those assignments. Student-to-student communication for the purpose of seeking or providing help was not officially sanctioned, nor was it encouraged.
- In the informal settings of the gym and schoolyard, things happened in a different manner. Students were in charge of deciding what types of activities they engaged in and how they engaged in them. They were able to prove that they were capable of initiating and executing teaching and learning activities.
- The swift transition between learning activities in the classroom did not favour slow or auditory learners, or students performing below grade level in general. The only option for catching up on unfinished work was to stay behind at the end of the day, which was not strictly enforced. This meant that some students' assignments were never completed, thus placing underachievers further behind.
- Most students reacted and resisted passively to what was taught and how it was taught. The degree of their resistance may have been different, but most of them resisted in one form or another.
- Marginalization of some parents by the school was just as perceptible as students' marginalization, and race as well as class contributed to that process. Marginalized parent's voices were mostly ignored, and their comments and concerns were not taken seriously by teachers or the school administration. Thus, their children hardly benefited from their attempts to advocate for them.
- The TDSB has become more efficient in testing and placing children into special need programs, than they are at supporting students who are achieving below grade level to learn how to learn. Students placed in Special Education programs in elementary school tend to be victims of lower streaming later in high school. The evidence suggest

that more and more African-Canadian students are still being erroneously designated as in need of Special Education when their needs could be fulfilled in the mainstream classroom rather than in the spaces created in special needs programs.

- The Board has been actively misrepresenting the purpose of Special Education and streaming to marginalized parents as well as students. Thus, programs created in good intentions for students who really need them are continually trapping students who do not belong there.
- Armed with stories of relatives and friends' children, some marginalized parents did not accept the school's explanation of the purpose of Special Education and lower streaming, or its judgment in designating their children as candidates for it.
- The school system may not have created the socio-economic class system in Ontario, but it has worked to reinforce it. Through its selection process of students for streamed categories, it has worked to channel working-class children prematurely out of schools and into the workforce. Contrary to its image as an equalizer of educational opportunities, the public school system in Toronto provides fewer, less challenging and less stimulating educational opportunities to children from working-class families.
- During the 1970s and eighties, there was a perception among public school teachers and administrators in Toronto that African-Canadian children who were born outside of Canada and followed their parents years later, were failing to perform to grade level due to emotional adjustment problems. Contradicting this, this study has shown that those who were born in Canada or migrated to Canada with their parents have not done performed any better in Toronto schools than their foreign-born African-American classmates. Thus, the disproportionately higher rate of streaming of African-Canadian students to applied/workplace courses and the higher high school drop-out rates among African-Canadians are attributed to systemic racism.
- This study has established a causal link between relegation to lower streams in school and high drop-out rate among students in those streams. The overwhelming majority of African-Canadian students still find themselves streamed into applied/workplace courses, and therefore the dropout rate among them remains much higher, compared to other racial groups, with the exception of aboriginal students.
- No significant reforms have been achieved improve grade level performance in African-Canadian and aboriginal children in particular and working class children in general between 1986 and 2010. At times, as a result of activism or a passionate call by one community leader or another has resulted in the Ontario government taking some actions towards leveling the playing field for marginalized students, only to be dismantled by the incoming Tory government later.
- Today in 2010, the overwhelming majority of the students in the Toronto school system are from racial minority communities, while the overwhelming majority of the teaching and administrative staff remains white.
- This study has established a link between early marginalization of African Canadian children during their primary education leading to lower streaming in high school. Their under achievement for a whole host of reasons was met by being streamed

## CHAPTER 9

into special education instead if give them what they needed, remedial program. Suddenly it downs on the students during their senior high schools years that they have been streamed to a level which will equip them with neither employable skills nor provide them with opportunity for further education. They also have to make a living, which means drug dealings and gangs. Thus the school system is implicated in being the incubator that hatches the gun violence in Toronto.

This study has shown that those who face a double-layered discrimination, first for being poor and second, for being black, suffer the highest “push-out” rate. The question is: is there any chance that such uneven treatment of youth in Toronto schools could be used as a rallying cry for change?

I do not think that changes towards inclusive education will come easy. Chapter Eight has shown that otherwise. However, I am a believer, as many others in this study have expressed, in the understanding that domination is contested and that the grip of the dominant class on education could be successfully challenged. In fact, the current system is not only vulnerable to change from organized movements, but even by concerned individuals, many of whom succeeded in pushing through innovative reforms previously. One young woman has done just that. Jacqueline was only 19 when she made the statement with which I have opened this chapter, in 1986. This prophetic black girl successfully fought off suggestions by her guidance counsellor to enroll in non-academic courses and go to college, instead of taking academic courses in high school so that she would be able to go to university. In spite of not having the complement of parental support to encourage her, she got exactly where she wanted to get, completed a university degree in journalism, and joined a major TV network as a reporter.

From an individual teacher’s perspective, close to home, a Canadian teacher was doing something very unique in Scarborough, Ontario in the 1980s and nineties. Not only did he teach a black history course to grade 12 students when the idea was almost unheard of, but he also published a series of books on the students’ personal and family stories. Bob Davis proved to us that when you consult and give students a choice, they can get to work in producing a tremendous amount of writing (Davis 1994). These examples suggest that the system can be challenged successfully, even by individuals.

For a broader change, school board officials and Ontario government politicians will have to be subjected to a well-planned and supported push for change from concerned citizens at large. It is about time that the public, most of which appears to be hungry for change, asked targeted questions to determine what the *blueprint for change* is. Meaningful and satisfactory change may require, among other things, the following multi-pronged strategy to come to fruition:

### FORGE A BROAD-BASED COALITION TO REFORM EDUCATION

We know that past movements to improve access to education have required a dual approach of lobbying and activism. To mention a couple of examples of activist

organization, we know that in the 1980s the Law Association of Ontario joined like-minded pressure groups and individuals in lobbying the Ontario government to create an independent civilian agency to investigate casualties of police violations. The Black Action Defense Committee was also founded in 1988 in response to the killing of a mentally-challenged black man, Lester Donaldson, which was the latest in a series of police shootings of black men in Toronto. The *Toronto Star* presented his case in an article after that particular shooting entitled “Police probe mental history of a man police killed” (*Toronto Star*, August 18, 1988). The article illustrated the full implications of police investigating their own perceived violations of the law. The Black Action Defense Committee protested the lack of an independent body that investigated police shootings of civilians. In tandem with other organizations with similar concerns, they organized and led demonstrations and picket lines of concerned citizens in Toronto. They were able to formulate legal opinion on the issue and a plan of action for getting the public on board.

In the same year that Lester Donaldson was shot by police, the Ontario government created an independent civilian agency called the Special Investigations Unit (SIU). The SIU was made responsible to “investigate circumstance involving police and civilians that have resulted in death, serious injury, or allegations of sexual assault” (SIU website). The government also revitalized the role of the Toronto Police Services Board in 1990, to serve as a civilian oversight of the Toronto Police Service more effectively. As a result of lobbying by the Ontario Law association and protesting by the Black Action Defense Committee, unlawful police actions not only against black men but also against all civilians are under constant scrutiny and no doubt, Toronto has become a bit safer - particularly for black men and youth. All indications are there that we still have a long way to go.

Today, the Ontario Law Association has faded into non-existence. The Black Action Defense Committee, however, still exists, but is far less visible and far less active than it once was. Perhaps they lacked fresh strategies to attract new generations of activists who could constantly revitalize and energize their efforts and keep constant pressure on politicians and the police alike.

The ebbing of activism against police brutality could be the reason that the SIU has come to be viewed as a lapdog rather than a watchdog. *The Toronto Star* has published an extensive study on police brutality and the effectiveness of the SIU to make the police accountable for their actions on Thursday, October 28, 2010. The study found a long list of unprovoked police-inflicted deaths and physical injuries on civilians. “All of these officers were quickly cleared by the Special Investigations Unit.” Further the study stated, “In its 20-year history, the SIU has conducted at least 3,400 investigations and laid criminal charges after only 95 of them, according to a *Star* analysis. The SIU does not track what happens to those that it charges. But the *Star* has, and found that only 16 officers have been convicted of a crime. Only three have seen the inside of a jail as inmates.” (*The Toronto Star*, Thursday, October 28, 2010). It is very clear that police officers across the province are treated far differently than civilians when accused of shooting, beating and running over and

killing people - some of them innocent bystanders - under the watchful eye of the SIU and the justice system in general. This underlines the need for activism by the Black Action Defense Committee and lawyer groups to be intensified.

Such worthwhile activism and efforts for change could be duplicated in education, with some adjustments to avoid the weaknesses of the above organizations. First of all, what seems to be needed is a broad-based and multi-racial coalition of activist parents, educators, youth representatives, community association representatives, labour, and organic intellectuals. Such a coalition will have the expertise and capacity to be a credible critic and at the same time, be able to conceptualize and articulate both the problems faced by ethnocultural minorities in Toronto schools and their potential solutions. Most of all, it will be able to mobilize people to lobby or protest, or both, on short notice. The organization People for Education is a good example. However, it remains to be seen how the organization will revitalize itself as the founding members move on and stop volunteering.

The purpose, of course, is to put intense pressure on government to act and at the same time be able to assist with providing alternative policy options. Such a collective would also realize it has to be forceful and remain active for the long-haul to avoid the pitfalls of the past, in which activist groups pushed for change, only to become complacent at the first signs of half-hearted government concessions. In other cases, when tangible changes were implemented, activist groups failed to defend them in the face of new government and their conflicting agendas. It is clear that such a coalition would have to take constant recruitment of new activists as one of its most important functions.

Perhaps the main building blocks of a broad-based coalition must be activist groups from the marginalized communities themselves, such as African-Canadian, aboriginal, gay and lesbian activist groups, and women. They need their own separate activist groups to effectively articulate the needs of their particular communities and bring them to the broad coalition. A good model of such an activist group has been the Organization of Parents of Black Children (OPBC). The OPBC has proved and that a group of activist parents coming together can lobby for all children. It would also make sense to be ready to go it alone if the broader coalition proves ineffective or unworkable. Again, it makes sense if each race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation-based activist group strive to include in its ranks parents, educators, leaders of community associations, organic intellectuals, youth, etc. for effective capacity building. It is also prudent for the marginalized activist group to keep on recruiting new blood to their ranks.

Finally, the African-Canadian community, which has been especially victimized and disproportionately pushed out of the full range of possibilities offered by school system, need to realize that no solution may be found without its involvement. It has the most to gain by getting organized to advocate for its children and all other children who need advocacy. Some may label their coming together as *ethnic identity politics*, and therefore, incompatible with integration and institutional unity. However, such critics need to be reminded that ethnic identity politics is the unintended result of racism and other forms of discrimination.

Ghettoization is not a working and living arrangement created and preferred by those who live in it. It is an economic and sociological condition imposed by dominant society on marginalized communities. As John Porter and Grace-Edward Galabuzi have shown, ghettos are created due to racial, ethnic and class discrimination (Porter 1965, Galabuzi 2007). In the face of prevalent racism and other forms of discrimination, it becomes necessary for marginalized groups to come together to tackle their predicaments. In this form, not only do they have to fight for change, but they are also in the best position to document and present the daily hurdles they face to the powers that be.

The first order of business of such a broad-based coalition could be to stop targeting marginalized students for identification for Special Education, as well as for lower streaming. It could simply demand an accountable and transparent assessment and evaluation process to identify only the truly learning-challenged students for a Special Education designation.

#### FREE EMPLOYMENT EQUITY POLICY FROM THE CYCLE OF WHITE MEN'S WRATH

Another building block in the blue print for all-inclusive change is an *employment equity policy* that works; up to now, employment equity policies have lacked teeth to contest structural and cultural inequities within the board. There is no point in drafting wonderful statements for optics and public consumption, only to have no intention of making them work or showing results.

From its very inception, the TDSB has had a wonderful-sounding policy entitled, TDSB Equity Foundation Statement and Employment Equity Policy. The forerunner boards, which together now constitute the TDSB, had their own equally wonderful-sounding employment equity policies. Evidently, such policies did not bring equity to the TDSB's racialized employees and communities. Board officials have become notorious for throwing in progressive sounding policies while sitting back and refusing to defend their implementation. The TDSB's history shows us that even with the passing of "paper tiger" policies, the backlash from white men has ravaged and poisoned the work environment. At the same time, no tangible benefits or changes have reached the most marginalized, most discriminated against, most disenchanted school communities.

An example was given above, in which the former Toronto Board of Education hired 858 new teachers in the early 1990s but only 22 of them (or 2.6%) were from racial minorities in a city where roughly 35% of the students were from racial minorities. This huge injustice unfolded under the watchful eye of its much celebrated employment equity policy. This study has shown that it is still happening today; at a time when 77% of the teachers are white, but over 70% of the students are children and youth of colour.

In fact, any reformulating of employment equity policy should start from investigating how and why the TDSB's employment equity policy has utterly failed



to facilitate equity. Currently, much of the hiring for new teachers and other staff positions, with the exception of hiring of the caretaking staff, is done by principals at the school level. The lack of change in the teaching staff shows that most of them are in a state of “business as usual,” as the Board’s employment policy continues to be a non-priority. This is quite evident from the research. Therefore, it makes sense to transfer all hiring responsibilities from principals, where hiring power is currently vested, to a well- aware and carefully-constituted hiring body at the central level, as it is done in some countries. It is obviously easier to peg the failures to comply with the objectives of employment equity policy on a few, rather than on multiple principals.

Finally, after four decades of failed employment equity policies, it is time to bring in demographic hiring *quotas*. Unless those in hiring positions can prove that applicants from racial minorities do not possess better or equal qualifications and experience compared to their white competitors, the applicants from racial minorities should be hired. Of course, this will not work unless it is accompanied by an effective auditing of new hires and promotions. That way, those in hiring positions are forced to account for their decisions. In parallel, unsuccessful applicants from racial minorities should be given the resources to question and appeal the decision not to hire them to ensure that the revitalized employment equity policy was followed.

The point has been made time and again that racial minority students need role models that look like them and share common culture. The necessity of this fact cannot be emphasized enough. It has been pointed out by Dei et al (1997, p. 230) that “the behaviour of teachers was commonly seen by drop-outs as favouring white students. One example given was that some teachers would engage in informal conversations or chatting with white students, but would ignore Black students.” In a situation where the staff is adequately diverse, this would, no doubt, happen less often. To get to this point, employment equity policy must be reformulated to produce as adequately diversified a workforce as it should. Racialized students would get the message that someday they, too, could occupy one of the positions around them, and consequently, more of them would feel compelled to stay in school.

#### MULTICENTRIC EDUCATION: IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN RE-ARRANGING THE DESKS

This study and all references used here have shown that the school system has doggedly resisted moves towards inclusive and therefore multicentric education while managing to maintain its Eurocentric character.

One of the most important tools that the school system has used to maintain its Eurocentric emphasis is the use of teacher-centred classroom discourse. The curriculum planners at the central level and the teacher in the classroom have been the only powers to select learning material and the learning activities that accompany them. This historical pattern has effectively shut out any contributions that could come from the diverse students, parents and their communities to enrich

the curriculum with their traditions, experiences and perspectives. Therefore, it is obvious that reform and change should include a move to a classroom model based on student-centred discourse.

Many teachers are trying to make a move of their own from teacher-centred to student-centred classroom discourse. They re-arrange the desks in the classroom in a circle, rectangular, square, horse-shoe shape, etc. For some, however, it does not go beyond that. They will do the same things they did before they re-arranged the desks.

Beyond re-arranging the desks, a student-centred classroom should be about welcoming the participation of students in all aspects of their own education as delineated in Chapter Two of this book. Student choice should include whether they want to use Shakespeare or modern literature as a means of further developing their abilities to read, write or engage in other forms of expressive arts.

Eurocentrism has maintained a stranglehold on the curriculum by sticking to old literature, much of it produced in pre-colonial Britain, as well as during the colonial and imperial eras. It is hard to imagine inclusive teaching material being infused in high school literature, for example, without scaling down Shakespeare and introducing masterpieces from other cultures and diverse backgrounds.

Critical pedagogy counts on crucial student participation in transforming the educational system. Critical pedagogy theorists like Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and others expect working-class students to provide the impetus for change in education. However, the enthusiasm to do so is not evident among working-class students in our school system. In our school system, working-class students are so cynical about working to change the system. They tend to quietly fade out or drop out, without making any waves, at least among black youth as Dei et al. (1997: 242) observed. For example, black youth in Toronto have been reverting to their own forms of governance outside society's social norms. They did not see any possibilities of changing the system, so they have decided to form their own world with its own social norms. Society's laws and social norms are externalities to their social organizations. When they run afoul of society's legal system, they treat it as external force they have to contend with, and if they can, they will ignore it, just like the system ignores them. The dominant "stop snitching" trend is a good example.

Somehow, that cycle of cynicism has to be broken. It seems that it has to be part of the transformative effort to develop critical skills among students, starting right from the primary level. We seem to limit the main objectives of the educational system to the 3Rs. We certainly need to think in terms of the 4Rs, reading, writing, arithmetic and *critical thinking* so that students will be full participants in helping schools meet their educational needs and facilitate social mobility to discriminated groups in society.

#### AIM REFORM TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF FAILING STUDENTS

It is a well-established fact that the school system is disproportionately failing working-class students compared to middle-class students. Alarm bells have been



sounding ever since formal education was established. It is also a well-established fact that the overwhelming majority of African-Canadians and aboriginal students find themselves to be part of the working class. Their racial identity comes with double or even triple folds of discrimination in school. It is no surprise that they are both failing and dropping out or fade out of school in greater numbers than their less discriminated against peers.

Normally, one would think that the reform efforts of the TDSB would target those students that are failing or prematurely dropping out. Contrary to any rational response, however, the Board's efforts have mostly been aimed at the middle-class. To be totally fair, for every miniscule program that the school system has established for the marginalized, it has opened a multiplicity of programming options for the middle-class. The creation of specialty schools and programs has been escalating since the 1980s. The TDSB is currently considering the recommendations of its Director, Chris Spence, to further establish four more specialty schools. In spite of the fact that Chris Spence is the first black Director of Education in the TDSB, the needs of black and other marginalized students continue to take a back seat to middle-class pandering.

So far, the TDSB has mostly focused on catering to the middle-class at the high school level. What is unique about Chris Spence's proposal is that he is intensifying the serving of the middle-class at the elementary level. It is a well-established fact that specialty schools do not benefit working-class students in particular and marginalized students in general. The level of poverty and lack of information does not allow marginalized parents to take advantage of high-end specialty schools. This is why the income level of the students who enroll in specialty schools is higher than average.

However, the most serious side effect of specialty schools is that they suck the life out of ordinary neighbourhood schools by taking away both the students and the parents who participate in making schools responsive to their communities. They are the more likely students and parents to challenge the school and its set ways of doing things. A look at who participates in the governance structure of the schools, namely student and school councils, will attest to that.

Under the "Futuristic Schools" category, the Director's proposal seeks to establish four elementary specialty schools. They include the Boys' Leadership Academy, the Girls' Leadership Academy, the Vocal Music Academy, and the Sports and Wellness Academy. The Director has presented his proposal to the Board of Trustees under what he has called a "*Program of Choice*." When asked if these programs will cater to an exclusive class of privileged students, Spence responded by saying that because there will be no entrance tests, the programs will be opened up to disadvantaged children. And yet, it is simply not feasible for most marginalized children to attend schools outside of their neighbourhood. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that if established, the *Program of Choice* will provide any choice for marginalized children.

First, it makes sense that most resources and efforts the Board can spare should be earmarked for helping those who are dropping or fading out. A more concerted

effort to support these students (with time and resources) will better equip them to succeed and meet their learning potential. Among other things, there is an urgent need to improve the curriculum, teacher/student ratios and teaching strategies in the schools where at-risk students are found. Again, it is common knowledge that the schools that serve marginalized students are mostly found in economically-depressed neighbourhoods, scattered all over the city, particularly in neighbourhoods which host a cluster of public housing projects. These are the same schools that have been undergoing the process of depletion of some of their most vocal and participatory students and parents, with the help of the Board's intensification of the creation of specialty schools.

It makes no sense to corner a few marginalized students for special help and leave the vast majority without any means to help them stay in school and succeed. In the absence of any reform aimed at marginalized students, it is good that the Africentric, First Nations/aboriginal and the Triangle schools have been established. However, no one believes they will solve the problems the vast majority of African-Canadian, aboriginal and gay and lesbian students encounter in the school system. They are no more than experimental programs where, hopefully, a multicentric curriculum will eventually be developed and tested. Hopefully, this is a multicentric curriculum that will ultimately carve a futuristic path for the whole school system to follow.

It is only logical to expect that the Director's *Program of Choice* to be aimed at all students, but first and foremost, it should be aimed at marginalized students. In addition, the major recipients of such funding and expertise should be poured into the schools which serve marginalized students. With the establishment of a multicentric curriculum, effective employment equity policy, and increased activism and scrutiny from parents and the community in general, such a focused effort would result in a huge leap forward in student success.

The TDSB may counter this proposed approach by stating they are doing a lot to ensure student success among marginalized students. Indeed, the Board has expanded the co-op program considerably, and has been actively promoting *credit recovery* courses under its *Student Success Program*. The credit recovery program is aimed mostly at applied/workplace students who fail or who do not complete courses. They recover the credit when failed "students repeat only the material not achieved", or "... can enroll in remedial programs designed for a group of students with similar needs", or they are encouraged to "... repeat the entire course" but with some supervision by a credit recovery teacher.

The Board has also partnered with the *Pathways to Education Program*, launched by the Regent Park Community Health Centre, with funding provided by the United Way. The program tries to identify students at risk of dropping out and provides them with tutoring, counseling, as well as some financial support. The Board is now trying to expand Pathways to Education to other parts of the City. (Pathways is currently in Rexdale, Lawrence Heights and some other parts of the city). The Ontario government and school boards have generally been under increased criticism for not doing enough for applied/workplace students. In 2004, the Ontario Secondary

School Teachers' Federation carried out a study which overwhelmingly confirmed that the applied/workplace students were a neglected stream. Its findings could be summarized by the following quote from a teacher with 29 years of teaching experience:

Class size was large in Grades 9 and 10, hence a large number of repeaters and IEP students, consequently giving daily attention was very limited. Behavioral issues could have been addressed with more effectiveness if the class sizes were reduced. With a large number it becomes more of a survival issue. (Antonelli 2004:11)

Indeed, it is totally inexplicable to have lower class-sizes in high-end, enriched programs and higher class-sizes in an applied or open classrooms, which include a mix of applied and academic streamed students. Currently I have 21 students in my enriched class, but 24 in my open class in the same grade level. This explains why we have had expansions of the above-mentioned program.

However, critics are quick to point out that programs like Credit Recovery, Pathways to Education, intensification of co-op education, and the latest proposal from the TDSB's Director of Education to pay students for high performance, will not change the fate of marginalized students by much. It may bring down the drop-out rate and give school board officials reason to gloat and pat themselves on the back, but such programs, while generally good to have, will not safeguard the long-term well-being of marginalized students because they treat the symptoms rather than the root causes of the problem. At-risk students will remain in lower streams and excluded from higher education. Besides, what percentage of marginalized students could the above programs reach? Critics charge that such stopgap measure programs represent nothing more than a tinkering with the problem.

Marginalized students are being tagged with IEPs from an early age, some as early as kindergarten, with an accompanying hidden curriculum that constantly reminds them that they are special, but inferior. After years of putdowns, letdowns and being treated as failures by staff and peers, perhaps most of the victims start to perceive themselves as such, and act the part. Faced with challenges from more caring teachers, or questions as to why they did not do their homework, these students often reply with a reaffirmation of their incapability: "check my IEP sir/miss, I have a problem."

In order to make inclusive education a reality, it is clear that the Ontario government needs to deal with the IEP process and who, if anyone at all, should be considered for them. It must find a way to ensure that no student gets tagged with an IEP without clear verifiable learning potential challenges.

Second, but equally importantly, there is a need for debate surrounding middle-class privileges and entitlements. Middle-class parents are demanding more and more resources and receiving them, while the working-class and those with double strikes against them, like African-Canadians, get stopgap solutions that do not deal with the root cause of their problems. They continue to be haunted with tags that

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label them “learning challenged” which ensure their lower level streaming while middle-class students get tagged “gifted” or “enriched,” which has become a ticket for privileged educational experiences.

### MAKE RACE AND CLASS-BASED STATISTICS READILY AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC

Lastly, as the final step towards realizing inclusive education, students and parents should be empowered with crucial information. In this day in age, one would think that all citizens, in fact, have the right to basic information. Parents, community representatives, educational activists, researchers, etc. should have access to information on student achievement on the basis of race and class, and if need be, on the basis of gender and ethnicity. That, in turn, will start the conversation on the symptoms of streaming, the drop out/push out/fade out rate by race and class. Consequently, there will be a good chance of finding solutions to the inequities that have been lingering for a long time.

For example, the *Grade Nine Student Survey: Fall 1980* found that 64.6% of black students were streamed into applied/workplace level, meaning that the possibility of attending university was put out of their reach. By comparison, less than half of white students, and only about a quarter of Asian students were streamed into those categories. The statistics on aboriginal students showed comparable results to that of black students (Wright and Dhanota 1981). Consequently, the drop-out rate was highest among black students and lowest among Asian students. Today, the Board does not provide race-based statistics, but all indicators are there that nothing has changed on the extent of streaming and its effects on black and First Nations students. This can only prove one thing; that black and aboriginal students are being discriminated against by being provided with inferior educational opportunities. The Board will be forced either to accept responsibility for this problematic trend, or accept the racist conclusion of right-wing, apologist psychologists like Arthur Jensen and Philippe Rushton who claim that blacks are less capable than whites and Asians in education (Jensen 1969; Rushton 1995). Highlighting race based statistics on student achievement can be a potent tool to force the Board of Education to take responsibility for failing racialized and working-class students.

In this respect, I see race and class-based statistics as crucial elements in the movement towards inclusive education. Not only will that force the Board to place its focus on marginalized students, it will also force it to redirect the bulk of its resources towards those who need it the most.

Another benefit of having these statistics is that the hitherto hidden or anecdotal reports of discriminatory practices against marginalized children will be substantiated and captured for the public eye. In the face of this brutal reality, parent and community activism may get a badly needed shot in the arm. At the same time, researchers will get busy crunching those numbers.

## APPENDICES

### **APPENDIX 1: FIELD OBSERVATION GUIDE**

#### **On the Neighbourhood**

1. The proportion of single-family homes versus a combination of low and high rises.
2. The extent of public housing in the neighbourhood.
3. The proportion of starter to higher-valued homes.

#### **About the School**

4. The state of the school building, i.e. was it in its original state, rebuilt Or renovated?
5. Is it open concept and trendy, or traditionally organized?

#### **In the Classroom**

6. What was the daily regimen of lessons and other activities?
7. How did the children react to each lesson or activity, of any?
8. What did they find easy or difficult to understand?
9. What did they like or dislike about it and why?
10. What subjects did they like or dislike and why?
11. What was the nature of student-peer interaction during the process?
12. Was there any student-teacher interaction during the process of lesson activity or delivery?
13. How did students handle disagreements among themselves?
14. How did students handle disagreements with the teacher?
15. Whom do students ask for help when they encountered difficulties?
16. Were there any students who offered to help other students to understand any difficult concepts or tasks they encountered?
17. Who were the usual seekers and recipients of help?

## **APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS**

### **A- On their Background**

1. Address and home phone number  
Is it: a single-family home, an apartment or townhouse?
2. How many playmates do you have in your neighbourhood?
3. Who is your best friend in your neighbourhood?
4. How many brothers and sisters do you have, and how many are younger or older?
5. Do your parents and grandparents live in Toronto, and how often do you see them?
6. How often do you see your grandparents on both sides of the family?
7. What is the language most often spoken in your household? What other languages are spoken?
8. In which school did you start kindergarten, and do you know if you attended a daycare program before that?
9. What is the address of your first daycare and first school?

### **B- About School**

10. How many times did you miss school within the last ten months? What were the reasons for missing school?
11. What kind of school-wide activities do you participate in?
12. Whom do you usually play with during recess?

### **C- In the Classroom**

13. How would you rate your general performance in all subjects:  
Failing Satisfactory Good Very Good Excellent
14. What is your most: a) favourite subject b) disliked subject
15. Who do you ask when you don't understand what the teacher wants you to do?
16. Who do you turn to for a further explanation when you don't quite understand what the teacher has explained in class?
17. Who do you ask when you have problems doing your homework at home?
18. What do you do when you complete your work earlier than the class?
19. Who would you rather be with or chat with in the classroom when you are allowed to do so?

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20. If you strongly disagree with what Mrs. Peterson said or did in class or with something she asked you to do, what do you usually do?
21. When your teacher gives you back a marked assignment and you still don't get the corrections, do you go back to your teacher for clarification?
22. If Mrs. Peterson would beg you to tell her the things that you would like her to do to change the way she teaches, what would you ask her to change?
23. If the principal would ask you to tell her the things that you would like her to do to change the way she runs the school, what would you tell her?

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### **APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUPS**

1. How are students selected for the enriched program?
2. What do you like or dislike about the way students are selected for the enriched program?
3. If you were given the power to change some of the subjects you are taught in school, what would they be and how would you change them?
4. If you were given the power to change the way you are taught in school,! what would they be and how would you change them?
5. How many of you take Language/Black Heritage Program?
6. Judging by the new things you learn from it, how would rate it?
7. Very BadBadGoodVery GoodExcellent
8. If you don't think it is any good, what would you change?
9. Why do you think early explorers like Marco Polo, Vasco da Gama, Christopher Columbus, etc, went around the world?



## **APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PARENTS**

1. Why did you pick Southview Community School for your child?
2. How often do you speak with the teachers of your child?
3. How many times a year do you visit the school and meet with the teachers?
4. How often do you help your child with homework?
5. Would you say that your child is getting the education she/he needs from the Canadian school system?
6. How would you rate the Canadian school system compared to the system in your country of origin?  
Better About the sameWorse
7. What would you like to see changed to make it better?

## **APPENDIX 5: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STAFF**

Under this group, the principal, teacher and community liaison officer were interviewed for their views on the following issues:

1. Currently, ministry mandated class-size is a maximum of 24 for kindergarten, 28 for grades 1 to 3, and 32 for grades 4 to 6, do you think it is low enough?
2. If not, why is it not coming down and is there any one or group doing something about it, by way of lobbying the government for improvement?
3. In what ways do you see parents helping to elevate the burden of large class-sizes?
4. What is the school's policy regarding homework?
5. How do you see parents' role with regards to homework?
6. With regards to new immigrant children, how do you decide how and where they should be placed?
7. What role do parents play during the evaluation and placement process?
8. Some parents are skeptical and fearful that their children may be inappropriately assessed and placed. How do you handle that?
9. Some parents are fearful of their children will be inappropriately place in Special Education, and that once they end up there, they will never be mainstreamed again. How do you handle that?
10. When did the school decide to go with wall-less classrooms?
11. What is the philosophy behind the wall-less classrooms?
12. What is the advantage of having wall-less classrooms?
13. There is a separate school within Southview Community School, what needs of the children and parents is it fulfilling that Southview Community School couldn't?
14. What role does the school see the larger community play in schooling?

## APPENDIX 6: STUDENT PROFILES

Here is a brief profile of the students interviewed and followed up with for this study. Those entered under “Other ...” are students who were actively observed in the classroom and around the school, but were not interviewed, and whose parents were similarly, not interviewed.

### African-Canadians

1. **Shrika** – She was born in St. Vincent, in the Caribbean. Her mother immigrated to Canada 6 years before Shrika in search of employment, and visited every two years in between. Shrika was left with her maternal grandmother and joined her mother, together with her grandmother, in December of 1985. She was hardly noticeable in class and always focused on doing her work. She was formally and age-wise in grade 5, but her teacher said she was performing in language at a grade 4 level.
2. **Trisha** – Born in Jamaica and was only two years-old when her mother immigrated to Canada, leaving her with her mother. It didn’t matter that her mother didn’t visit frequently because Trisha thought that her maternal grandmother was her real mother. She found it confusing why that woman who worked in Canada sent lavish gifts and money for her and her “mother.” Her mother arrived in Jamaica to finally bring Trisha to Canada in January of 1985. She was well-behaved, low-key, and always focused on doing the work assigned. She was formally in grade 6, but performing in language at grade 5 level. She quit the Black Heritage program complaining that “it was a zoo.”
3. **Donovan** – Born in Canada of a Jamaican father and Trinidadian mother. He was well-behaved and well-liked by all members of the class. It was apparent that while he was respectful of his teacher and students, he was getting by with minimum effort as far as school work was concerned. His teacher said that he was passing and he was performing at grade level. He quit the Black Heritage program complaining “they don’t teach you anything new” though Donovan was not known for complaining about anything other than getting in trouble with Mrs. Peterson for talking.

### Other African-Canadians

4. **Helen** – She was born in Canada of West Indian parents. Father was a teacher and mother worked for the Ontario government. She usually led “News Time” and most of time, leads raising hands up to answer T’s questions during question

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and answer sessions, and usually had the right answers. She was totally focused on her work in the classroom and very active in sports.

5. **Daniel** – He was born of a Jamaican mother and African father in England and immigrated to Canada in August of 1985. Daniel didn't know which country in sub-Saharan Africa his father came from.
6. **Randy** – Born in Toronto of parents who came from two different Caribbean Islands but didn't know which islands. His parents do not live together and Randy lives with his mother and older sister, who sometimes did his homework for him.
7. **Akil** – Mother from St. Kitt's, father from St. Lucia and also born in Toronto. His parents are separated and he lives with his mother and younger sister.

All three of the boys described above were loveable and had no behaviour-related problems. However I dubbed them "the three lost black boys" for the simple reason that they were never focused on their work. Instead they liked to find excuses to quietly move around, not only within the classroom but also to common places such as the library. They were all formally as determined by their age in grade five but operating at below grade level.

### Hispanic Canadians

8. **Sonya** – Both parents came from Ecuador. Her parents split soon after she was born and she was sent back to Ecuador to be cared for by her grandmother where she did grades one to five. She only joined her mother back in Canada in September of 1985. She was in grade six but said to have performed below grade level in writing and spelling. She has never seen her father, though he lived in Toronto. She was very focused in her work and always tried hard.
9. **Yasmina** – Originally from El Salvador, the entire family, father, mother and two daughters arrived from Mexico in May of 1985, where they had lived as refugees for some years. Her teacher said that Yasmina needed extra help in English and math. Otherwise, she struggled to achieve at a grade six level. Both parents didn't speak English and Yasmina had to translate for me when I interviewed them, as her younger sister watched. Yasmina herself didn't speak much English at the time of entry to Canada.

### Pakistani Canadians

10. **Bilal** – Both parents came from the Urdu-speaking part of Pakistan. He lived with his father, mother and little sister. Bilal was two years-old when the family immigrated to Canada. He takes enriched math and he was one of the highest achievers in the classroom. His father left it to him whether or not to take Urdu heritage language and Bilal decided not to.
11. **Tabasum** – Both parents came from the Urdu-speaking part of Pakistan.

Tabasum was one of the highest achievers in the class overall. She went for enrichment in both math and drama. She was a baby when the whole family arrived in Canada. She took Urdu after school through the Heritage Language Program.

12. **Sharifa** – Parents were from the Punjabi-speaking part of Pakistan. She performed at grade level, grade six. She was born in India, and family arrived in Canada when she was only two. She lived with mom, dad and six month-old sister. She was learning Punjabi through the Heritage Language Program.

#### **Vietnamese Canadians**

13. **Phuong** – Originally from Vietnam, the family arrived in Canada in 1979, via Hong Kong. She never attended kindergarten because the family was in transition. She had a lot of catching up to do during her primary years. At the time of this research she was doing fine and in fact, half-way through the year she was sent for the enrichment program in English. She learned how to speak and write Vietnamese at home and with help of the Heritage Language Program provided by the Board of Education.
14. **Nhie** – Her Vietnamese family arrived in Canada when she was just a year old, via Indonesia, so like Phuong she was a baby of “Boat People.” Perhaps she was the highest-achieving student in the class. She was one of three who went for enrichment in multiple subjects, including math and English. She learned how to speak and write Vietnamese at home and with the help of Vietnamese Heritage Language program after school.

#### **Other East and South-East Asians**

15. **Amy** – Her family moved to Alberta from China when she was about two years old. She started kindergarten in Toronto. She was one of the highest-achieving students in the class and went for enrichment in multi-subjects.

#### **Greek Canadians**

16. **Theodora** – Born in Canada of new immigrant Greek parents. She was performing at a grade level, but struggling, though very much task-oriented and very much focused on her studies. On top of that, she was teacher’s pet and eager to please and impress Mrs. Peterson. She takes gymnastics and Greek Heritage Language after school and on Saturdays. Her favourite holiday was the Greek National Holiday celebrated on the Danforth commemorating the end of 400 hundred years of Turkish rule. She lived with both parents and older sister.
17. **Gus** – Born in Canada of new immigrant Greek parents. He was performing at grade level. Capable of achieving higher in his studies, but not willing to put the effort beyond the minimum of what was needed to keep him at a grade

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level. He was always fun to talk to and very well-liked by all students and his teacher. He was always very active under the table in cracking jokes and making others laugh, and yet he rarely got caught doing that by Mrs. Peterson. He and Donovan were inseparable. He lived with both parents and a little sister. He took Greek Heritage Language after school and actively participated in Greek national festivities on the Danforth.

### **Other Euro-Canadians**

**Susan** – She was born in Canada from a blended Western European heritage who could 'count many generations living in Canada. She was one of two out of thirty students in the classroom who went for enrichment in multiple subjects.

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